What is meningitis?

Answering your questions about meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia

24hr nurse-led Helpline

0845 6000 800

www.meningitis-trust.org
Meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia are serious diseases that can affect anyone at any time. Although they are uncommon, they can strike unexpectedly, especially in babies and young children. The speed at which people become ill, and the dramatic and sometimes devastating course of events, make meningitis and septicaemia alarming diseases.

This leaflet provides important information about these diseases and explains the facts behind the fear.

If you would like more information about anything contained in this leaflet, please phone our 24-hour helpline on 0845 6000 800 or visit www.meningitis-trust.org

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is inflammation of the membranes that surround and protect the brain and spinal cord.

The most common germs that cause meningitis are viruses and bacteria.

**Viral meningitis** is rarely life-threatening, although it can make people very unwell. Most people who get viral meningitis recover after a few weeks without any specific treatment.

**Bacterial meningitis** can be life-threatening and needs urgent medical attention. Most people who suffer from bacterial meningitis will recover, but unfortunately in some cases people can die.

Many different bacteria can cause meningitis. The three main types are Hib, pneumococcus and meningococcus.

The meningococcus is the most common cause of bacterial meningitis in the UK and causes most public concern.

**Did you know?**
Nine out of 10 people who get meningitis will survive.
**Meningococcal meningitis**

Meningococcal bacteria can cause both meningitis and septicaemia (blood poisoning). Together these are known as meningococcal disease.

**Meningococcal septicaemia** can happen with meningitis or on its own. Septicaemia is generally more life-threatening than meningitis and can also be caused by other germs.

![Meningococcal bacteria](image)

**What are the signs and symptoms?**

Meningitis and septicaemia are not always easy to recognise at first.

In the early stages, signs and symptoms can be similar to many other more common illnesses, for example flu. Early symptoms can include fever, headache, nausea (feeling sick), vomiting and general tiredness.

**Trust your instincts**

If you suspect meningitis or septicaemia, get medical help immediately.

The common signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia are shown in the pictures opposite. Others can include rapid breathing, diarrhoea and stomach cramps. In babies, check if the soft spot (fontanelle) on top of the head is tense or bulging.
Common signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia

**Babies and toddlers**
- Fever - cold hands and feet
- Refusing food or vomiting
- Fretful or dislike being handled
- Pale blotchy skin
- Blank, staring expression
- Drowsy, difficult to wake
- Stiff neck, arched back
- High-pitched cry

**Children and adults**
- Fever - cold hands and feet
- Vomiting
- Headache
- Stiff neck
- Dislike bright lights
- Joint or muscle pain
- Drowsy, difficult to wake
- Confusion

You should know how to recognise the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia. In some cases, acting quickly to get medical help may mean the difference between life and death.

Remember, symptoms may sometimes develop slowly, but the person can become ill very quickly.

Symptoms do not appear in any order and some may not appear at all.
What about the rash?

One sign of meningococcal septicaemia is a rash that does not fade under pressure (see ‘Glass test’).

- This rash is caused by blood leaking into the tissues under the skin. It starts as tiny pinpricks anywhere on the body. It can spread quickly to look like fresh bruises.
- This rash is more difficult to see on darker skin. Look on paler areas of the skin and under the eyelids.

**Septicaemic rash**

**Glass test**

A rash that does not fade under pressure will still be visible when the side of a clear glass is pressed firmly against the skin.

If someone is ill or obviously getting worse, do not wait for a rash. It may appear late or not at all.

A fever with a rash that does not fade under pressure is a medical emergency.

**What to do if you suspect meningitis or septicaemia**

- Contact your GP immediately. If your GP is not available, go straight to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- Describe the symptoms carefully and say that you think it could be meningitis or septicaemia.
- Early diagnosis can be difficult. If you have seen a doctor and are still worried, don’t be afraid to ask for medical help again.
How are the germs spread?

The germs that cause bacterial meningitis usually live harmlessly in the back of the nose and throat. Most of us will carry them at some stage in our lives without becoming ill, and they help us build up natural immunity. Occasionally, these germs defeat the body’s defences and cause infection.

The germs are passed from person to person through coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing. But only a very small number of these will cause disease.

Did you know?
Babies and young children are more at risk of getting meningitis. They cannot easily fight infection because their immune system is not fully developed.

How easy is it to catch meningitis?

Because the germs causing bacterial meningitis are not passed easily from person to person, most cases happen alone. But when there is a case of meningococcal disease (meningitis or septicaemia), there is a small chance that further cases can happen.

The local public health office may offer antibiotics to people who have been identified as coming into close contact with someone who has meningococcal disease, reducing the risk of further cases.
Treatment

Bacterial meningitis and septicaemia demand urgent medical treatment with antibiotics. If they are recognised and treated early, they are less likely to become life-threatening. Prompt treatment reduces the risks of serious after-effects and complications.

Prevention

Vaccination is the only way to prevent meningitis. Effective vaccines are available to prevent some types of bacterial meningitis.

Meningococcal bacteria that cause disease almost always belong to particular groups – A, B, C, W-135 and Y. Most meningococcal disease in the UK is caused by groups B and C.

Vaccines that protect against meningococcal group C (men C) and Hib bacteria are offered as part of routine childhood immunisation. These two vaccines have dramatically reduced the number of cases of meningitis in the UK.

There is currently no vaccine to protect against meningococcal group B disease - so always be aware of the signs and symptoms.

Professor Keith Cartwright MA BM FRCPPath
Meningitis Trust Medical Director

Other vaccines are also available which offer protection against different types of meningitis, for different age groups and those at special risk.
We, the Meningitis Trust, are a registered charity. We focus on providing support, through a range of professional services for people of all ages affected by meningitis. We provide education programmes for the public and health professionals, and also fund research into vaccines, treatments and the after-effects of meningitis.

Our support services include the following.

24-Hour Nurse-led Helpline that provides information and emotional support.

Counselling Service that offers face-to-face counselling for sufferers and their families.

Financial Support Grants to help people cope with the devastating effects of the disease. Grants include respite care, specialist equipment and funeral costs.

Home Visits by our staff to offer support and information.

One-to-One Contacts that provide an opportunity for sufferers to share their experiences with others affected by meningitis.

You can get more written information about the after-effects of meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia, and our support services, by contacting our helpline.

We are a charitable organisation which relies on voluntary donations.

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