

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE – THE FACTS

Meningitis is an illness where the coverings of the brain and spinal cord become inflamed. It can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or other agents.

Viral meningitis is rarely serious and is not helped by antibiotics. **Bacterial meningitis** is less common than viral meningitis, but is a serious illness and needs urgent treatment with antibiotics. The most common of the bacteria that cause meningitis is the **meningococcus**. These bacteria can also cause **blood poisoning (septicaemia)**, which is the more dangerous form of the disease. The term **meningococcal disease** refers to both the meningitis and septicaemia forms of the disease caused by the bacteria.

Meningococcal bacteria can be divided into several groups, but nearly all disease is caused by groups A, B, C, W-135, and Y. Now that MenC vaccine is available, providing effective protection against the group C meningococcus, disease caused by this strain is rare. Outbreaks in schools and universities, most often associated with group C infection are also very rare. Group B, for which there is no effective vaccine, has been unaffected by the Men C vaccine and continues to be responsible for the majority of confirmed cases.

Where are the meningococcus bacteria found?

- These bacteria are very common. At any one time 10-20% of us carry the meningococcus in our nose and throat without knowing it.

How do we pick up the bacteria?

- We can pick up the meningococcus if we have very close prolonged contact (e.g. living in the same house) with someone carrying it. The contact has to be close because the bacteria are weak and cannot live for more than a few seconds outside the body.
- The bacteria cannot be picked up from water supplies, swimming pools or household objects such as clothes, furniture or cups.

If the bacteria are so common, why do so few of us develop the illness?

- Even though we come into contact with the meningococcus regularly, our bodies are able to fight off the infection. A tiny number of people who pick up the bacteria develop meningitis or septicaemia or both within 2-12 days of doing so. We do not yet fully understand why the bacteria cause such severe illness in these people. It may be due to weaknesses in their body defence systems.
- It is rare for two or more cases to occur together. The majority occur as single cases, with no increased risk to others, e.g. in the school or community.

What precautions are taken if there is a case?

- A short antibiotic course is given to very close contacts, usually only those living in the same house. The antibiotics are given to kill the bacteria that they may be carrying in their nose or throat, and so reduce the risk of infection to others. Although the risk is very low, close contacts may still develop the disease despite taking the antibiotics. So they need to be on the lookout for symptoms in the week following.
- Vaccines are available against some strains of meningococcus (groups A and C). They are given to the household and very close contacts if the patient has group A or C meningococcal infection. Unfortunately there is as yet no effective vaccine against group B meningococcus.

How can you tell if someone has the disease?

- The early signs of meningitis and septicaemia are non-specific and similar to those of flu and other viral infections. This makes diagnosis very difficult.
- However, someone with meningitis will become very ill. The illness may progress over one or two days, but it can develop very rapidly sometimes in a matter of hours.
- The signs and symptoms are shown below

Not all these symptoms may show at once.



Headache



Fever



Vomiting



Neck stiffness, joint pains



Drowsiness or confusion – coma



Dislike of bright lights



Rash of red-purple spots or bruises*

The rash is due to the septicaemia and does not fade when pressed firmly e.g. with a glass.

- Overall more than 90% of people who get meningococcal disease recover.
- However, the disease can kill in hours if not treated.

Seek urgent medical help if you think someone has the disease.

Early treatment saves lives

Take the person straight to the nearest casualty department in an emergency

For further information or general advice contact:

The Meningitis Research Foundation
Tel: 0808 800 3344 or www.meningitis.org

The National Meningitis Trust
Tel: 0800 028 1828 or www.meningitis-trust.org