

## Meningitis and Septicaemia

Meningitis and septicaemia are serious diseases. They can affect anyone at any age, but babies, children and young adults are most at risk.

Meningitis and septicaemia are not common, but they can kill in hours. Most people survive if they are diagnosed early enough, but some are permanently disabled and others may take a long time to recover fully.

A very important way to protect your family is to get them immunised. But some types of meningitis cannot be prevented, so it is also very important that you know about these diseases and their symptoms. Anyone with meningitis or septicaemia needs urgent medical help.

### What is meningitis?

Meningitis is swelling of the lining around the brain. The most serious forms of meningitis are caused by bacteria.

### What is septicaemia?

Septicaemia is blood poisoning. It can be caused by the same bacteria that cause meningitis.

You can get meningitis and septicaemia at the same time.

### How can I protect myself and my family?

- An excellent way to protect your children is to make sure they have the vaccines against meningitis and septicaemia. The vaccines offered to all babies in the childhood immunisation programme protect against several different kinds of meningitis and septicaemia - **MenC**, **Hib** and **pneumococcal**, and meningitis caused by **mumps**.
- Any adult over age 65, can get vaccinated against **pneumococcal** meningitis. People of all ages with health problems that put them at higher risk from pneumococcal disease can also get vaccinated against it.
- The TB vaccine (called **BCG**) gives special protection to children against TB meningitis. In Ireland all babies get it at birth, and in the UK it is offered to babies and un-vaccinated older children and adults who are at higher risk of TB. This may be because of where they live or have lived in the past, where they work, or because their parents or grandparents came from a country with high rates of TB.
- International travellers may need a special 'quadrivalent' meningitis vaccine. This protects against meningitis and septicaemia caused by four different strains: **Men A, C, Y and W135**. A valid certificate showing that you have had the 'quadrivalent' ACWY meningococcal vaccine within the past 3 years is now a visa requirement for pilgrims and seasonal workers to enter Saudi Arabia. You have to get the vaccine and the certificate from your doctor or a travel clinic at least three weeks before leaving for Saudi Arabia. If you are travelling with children under 2 years of age, you will need to do this more than three months before travelling, because young children require two injections given three months apart.
- People travelling to Africa may also need quadrivalent vaccine. Your doctor's surgery or a travel clinic can tell you which countries are affected and arrange for you to have the vaccine if you need it.

Remember, there are several kinds of meningitis and septicaemia that cannot be prevented. Most meningitis in the UK and Ireland is caused by **MenB**, and there is no vaccine to prevent it. That's why it's important to know the symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia in order to protect you and your family.

## What are the symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia?

### Know the Symptoms *Please keep this for reference*

- Meningitis and septicaemia can be hard to recognise at first. Symptoms can appear in any order, but the first symptoms are usually fever, vomiting, headache and feeling unwell, just like many mild illnesses. The **'red flag' symptoms** often appear earlier than meningitis symptoms like neck stiffness and dislike of light, and before the more **serious symptoms**.
- Not everyone gets all of these symptoms.
- Septicaemia can occur with or without meningitis.

	Septicaemia	Meningitis
Fever and/or vomiting 		
Severe headache 		
Limb/joint/muscle pain (sometimes stomach pain/diarrhoea) 		
Cold hands and feet/shivering 		
Pale or mottled skin 		
Breathing fast/breathless 		
Rash (anywhere on the body) 		 Not present in all cases
Stiff neck 		 Less common in young children
Dislike of bright lights 		 Less common in young children
Very sleepy/vacant/difficult to wake 		
Confused/delirious 		
Seizures (fits) may also be seen 		

### Are there special symptoms you can see in babies?

Yes. Other symptoms to look out for in babies include:

- Tense or bulging soft spot on the baby's head
- Refusing to feed
- Irritable when picked up, with a high pitched or moaning cry
- A stiff body with jerky movements, or else floppy and lifeless

Babies can get ill very quickly, so check often.

### Will everyone with meningitis and septicaemia get all these symptoms?

No. Not everyone gets all of the symptoms and they can appear in any order. If there is a rash, you should do the Tumbler Test. Press a glass tumbler firmly against the rash. If the rash does not fade and you can see it through the glass, get medical help immediately.



The rash can be harder to see on dark skin. So check for spots all over the body, especially on paler areas like palms of the hand or soles of the feet. Also look on the stomach, inside the eyelids and the roof of the mouth.



Remember, a very ill person needs medical help even if there are only a few spots, a rash that fades, or no rash at all.

## What should I do if I think someone has meningitis or septicaemia?

A person with meningitis or septicaemia can get very ill, very quickly. So if someone is ill, check for symptoms regularly. If you think it could be meningitis or septicaemia get medical help immediately.

Meningitis Research Foundation **Freefone** 24 hour helpline

UK - **080 8800 3344**

Republic of Ireland - **1800 41 33 44**

Head Office:  
Midland Way  
Thornbury  
Bristol  
BS35 2BS  
Tel: 01454 281811

Scotland Office:  
28 Alva Street  
Edinburgh  
EH2 4PY

Tel: 0131 510 2345

Northern Ireland Office:  
71 Botanic Avenue  
Belfast  
BT7 1JL

Tel: 028 9032 1283

Republic of Ireland Office:  
63 Lower Gardiner  
Street  
Dublin 1

Tel: 01 819 6931

A charity registered in England and Wales no 1091105, in Scotland no SC037586, & in Ireland CHY 12030.  
© Meningitis Research Foundation 2007

Typeset by

K International p.l.c

The Multilingual Solutions Company

