Health concerns: Meningitis

With meningitis, children who appear ‘a bit off colour’ may be fighting for their lives within a matter of hours, so it’s crucial to be aware of the warning signs, says charity Meningitis Research Foundation...
Meningitis and septicaemia, the blood poisoning form of the disease, can progress at an alarming rate. Yet in the early stages they can be mistaken for other illnesses. A fever, headache and feeling generally ill may suggest that a child has a virus or the flu. In meningitis, the signs and symptoms can be more difficult to identify, as severe meningitis signs can be mistaken for other illnesses.

Who is at risk?
Young children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to contracting meningitis. Babies in the first year of life are the most vulnerable. Meningitis kills more UK children under the age of five than any other infectious disease. Babies and young children are at greater risk because their immune system is not yet fully developed, meaning they cannot easily fight infection. Diagnosing meningitis in babies is made more difficult by the fact that they cannot tell you how they feel.

Signs and symptoms
Time is of the essence when dealing with meningitis and septicaemia, so ensure that all staff are aware of the signs and symptoms as it might just save a life.

Symptoms which are specific to meningitis and septicaemia and less common in milder illnesses:
- Headache
- Vigorous vomiting
- Blurred vision
- Weakness
- Cold hands and feet/shivering
- Breathing fast/breathlessness

Common causes
There are a number of causes of meningitis, but the two most common are viruses and bacteria.

- Viral meningitis is rarely life-threatening, but can leave patients with lifelong after-effects.
- Bacterial meningitis is life-threatening.
- Around 10 per cent of the population carry these bacteria harmlessly at any one time in the back of their nose and throat.
- Meningitis can affect anyone, of any age, at any time; however, some groups are more at risk than others.

Be proactive
IT’S EASY TO RAISE MONEY AND AWARENESS IN YOUR SETTING...

MRF can provide posters and other materials to help raise awareness and alert your staff and parents to the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia. The fundraising pack, contains everything you need to host your event, including posters, stickers and balloons. The pack also contains vital photo cards and easy to understand information leaflets to help parents of young children spot those all important symptoms of meningitis. A great way to get active, have some fun and raise money for a good cause.

What should we do if we are worried about a baby/child?
Trust your instincts. If you think one of your children has meningitis or septicaemia get medical help immediately from a GP or go to the nearest hospital A&E. Tell them you are worried it could be meningitis or septicaemia.

In the UK, around 3,400 people are affected by meningitis each year. Of these, one in 10 people who contract the disease lose their lives and many more are left with life-altering disabilities.

Meningitis and septicaemia are deadly diseases that can kill in hours. Meningitis is caused by the inflammation of the meninges, the lining around the brain and spinal cord, as a result of infection most often caused by bacteria or viruses. Septicaemia is the blood poisoning form of the disease where bacteria multiply at a huge rate, producing toxins that attack the lining of the blood vessels. One of the results is that the body produces an inflammatory response, which can result in a non-blanching rash to appear on the surface of the skin.

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