



findoutmore

Visit the MRF website at meningitis.org or call the free helpline on 080 8800 3344 (UK) or 1800 41 33 44 (RoI).

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...

**Health
concerns:**

Meningitis



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

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 such as flu. Sadly, in some cases, when meningitis is finally diagnosed, it can be too late to save lives. With early diagnosis and treatment giving the best chance for a full recovery, knowing the signs that differentiate meningitis from milder illnesses is key.

What are meningitis and septicaemia?

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.

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 perfectly 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.

- Meningitis can strike quickly and without warning. If meningitis is suspected, urgent medical attention is essential.

- Most people will make a good recovery, but a quarter of survivors will suffer life-long after-effects as severe as brain damage, amputations, hearing loss and epilepsy.

- Vaccines are the only way to prevent meningitis, and until we have vaccines to prevent all types, you need to know the signs and symptoms to look out for and the action to take.

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 a 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:

- Limb/joint/muscle pain
- Cold hands and feet/shivering
- Rash
- Stiff neck
- Dislike of bright lights
- Confused/delirious
- Seizures

Other symptoms:

- Fever and/or vomiting
- Severe headache
- Very sleepy/vacant/difficult to wake

- Pale or mottled skin
- Breathing fast/breathless

Other symptoms in toddlers and babies:

- Refusing to eat/feed
- Irritable, not wanting to be held/touched
- A stiff body with jerky movements, or floppy, unable to stand up

Babies and tiny tots may also have:

- A tense or bulging soft spot on the head (fontanelle)
- A high-pitched or moaning cry

It's important to remember that not everyone will get all of these symptoms. The rash that doesn't fade when a glass is pressed on it is a well known symptom of meningitis and septicaemia, but whilst it is a vital indicator, it can often be a late symptom or not appear at all. Don't wait for a rash.

How can meningitis be prevented?

Meningitis vaccines give excellent protection but can't prevent all forms of meningitis and septicaemia. Although there are three types of meningitis and septicaemia (Hib, pneumococcal and meningococcal Group C) currently covered by the national childhood immunisation schedule, many parents are not aware that their children are not protected against all strains of the diseases.

There is currently no vaccine for meningococcal Group B, which is responsible for the majority of cases in the UK (around five cases a day). Neonatal forms of the disease are also not currently vaccine preventable.

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.

Be proactive

IT'S EASY TO RAISE MONEY AND AWARENESS IN YOUR SETTING...

MRF can provide symptoms posters to put up on your setting's wall and cards to hand out to parents free of charge. Nurseries can also support MRF and help raise vital funds and awareness of the disease with *Boogie Fit*, an interactive DVD featuring CBeebies' Boogie Pete and the MRF mascot, Marvin the Monster.

"Children who like the BBC's popular *Boogie Beebies* programme will love this DVD with songs and actions to get children moving," said Teach Nursery's

review of the latter. "Although you can buy the lively DVD on its own from MRF, we would recommend using it to stage your very own *Boogie Fit* event. 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."

