

## **MENINGITIS FACT SHEET**

**Meningitis is an infection of the meninges (protective membranes) that surround the brain and spinal cord.** The infection causes the meninges to become inflamed (swollen), which in some cases can damage the nerves and brain.

### **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS IN CHILDREN**

Although anyone of any age can get meningitis, babies and young children are often affected. The signs and symptoms to look out for in your child are:

- a very high fever with cold hands and feet
- they may feel agitated but not want to be touched
- they may cry continuously
- some children can become very sleepy and it may be difficult to wake them up
- they may appear confused and unresponsive
- they may develop a blotchy red rash that does not fade when you roll a glass over it

In older children and adults, the symptoms of meningitis can include:

- severe headache
- vomiting
- high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over
- stiff neck
- sensitivity to light
- rapid breathing
- a general feeling of being unwell
- a distinctive skin rash (although not everyone will have this)

It is important to note that not everyone will get all of the above symptoms.

**If you notice any of the symptoms of meningitis, particularly in young children, seek medical help immediately.**

### **TYPES OF MENINGITIS**

There are two types of meningitis. They are:

- **BACTERIAL MENINGITIS:** caused by bacteria such as *Neisseria meningitidis* or *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and spread through close contact
- **VIRAL MENINGITIS:** caused by viruses that can be spread through coughing, sneezing and poor hygiene

### **BACTERIAL MENINGITIS**

Bacterial meningitis is very serious and should be treated as a medical emergency. If the bacterial infection is left untreated, it can cause severe brain damage and infect the blood (septicaemia).

Around 1,265 cases of meningitis were caused by the *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria in England and Wales in 2009 and 2010. The number of cases has decreased in recent years because of a successful vaccination programme that protects against many of the bacteria that can cause meningitis.

However, there is currently no vaccine to prevent meningococcal group B disease, which is the most common cause of bacterial meningitis in the UK. It is essential to know the signs and symptoms to look for and get medical help if you are worried.

Bacterial meningitis is most common in children under five years old, and in particular in babies under the age of one. It is also common among teenagers aged 15 to 19 years.

### **VIRAL MENINGITIS**

Viral meningitis is the most common and less serious type of meningitis. It is difficult to estimate the number of cases of viral meningitis because symptoms are often so mild they are mistaken for flu.

Viral meningitis is most common in children and more widespread during the summer months.

### **Diagnosing meningitis**

Meningitis can be difficult to diagnose because it often comes on suddenly and can be easily confused with flu as many of the symptoms are the same.

However, it is very important that you seek immediate medical help if you notice any of the symptoms of meningitis, particularly in a young child.

This may mean going to the accident and emergency (A&E) department of your local hospital in the middle of the night. Do not wait for the purple rash to appear, because not everyone gets a rash.

Where meningitis is suspected, treatment will usually begin before the diagnosis has been confirmed. This is because some of the tests can take several hours to complete and it could be dangerous to delay treatment for that amount of time.

The doctors will carry out a physical examination to look for signs of meningitis or septicaemia (blood poisoning), such as a rash. They will also carry out a number of other tests to confirm the diagnosis.

### **Treating meningitis**

Viral meningitis usually gets better within a couple of weeks, with plenty of rest and painkillers for the headache.

Bacterial meningitis is treated with antibiotics (medication that treats infections caused by bacteria). Treatment will require admission to hospital, with severe cases treated in an intensive care unit so the body's vital functions can be supported.

Several decades ago, almost everyone who had bacterial meningitis would die. Nowadays, deaths are mainly caused by septicaemia (blood poisoning) rather than

meningitis. Meningococcal disease (the combination of meningitis and septicaemia) causes death in around one in 10 cases.

Up to a quarter of people may experience complications of meningitis, such as hearing loss, after having bacterial meningitis.

## **Vaccination**

The best way to prevent meningitis is by ensuring vaccinations are up-to-date. Children in the UK should receive the available vaccines as part of the childhood vaccination programme.

It is also important to check your travel vaccinations are up-to-date before travelling in certain parts of the world.