

The Facts About Meningitis



Every Second Counts

Viral meningitis

Viral meningitis is quite a common complication of some common viral illnesses e.g. herpes simplex virus, echovirus. Viral meningitis is rarely fatal and not usually injurious unless the patient also has an immune disease.

Amoebic meningitis

Amoebic meningitis is very rare. It is usually caused by water containing amoeba being forced up the nose when jumping into unchlorinated swimming holes when the water temperature is about 30°C.

Fungal meningitis

Fungal meningitis is very rare and usually occurs only in patients with an immune disease, such as leukaemia or AIDS. Fungal meningitis is usually slow to start and difficult to diagnose and treat.

How serious is meningitis?

Meningitis is a very serious illness. However, if the cause is diagnosed and treated quickly, most people make a complete recovery. With bacterial meningitis, the patient will usually become very ill within hours. Prompt antibiotic therapy can mean the difference between life and death.

How can you tell if someone has meningitis?

Most cases of meningitis start with a fever, a severe headache and neck stiffness, followed by vomiting and altered consciousness e.g. excessive irritability or drowsiness. A spotty unblanching red/purple rash sometimes occurs, most commonly with meningococcal meningitis and is an important sign that the patient must see a doctor urgently. Sometimes the rash may appear without specific symptoms of meningitis – this occurs when there is infection of the blood (septicaemia), and the predominant symptoms may include fever, chills, vomiting, muscle/joint pains and drowsiness/confusion.

If you suspect meningitis seek urgent medical advice. Do not wait for all symptoms or the rash to appear.

Signs and symptoms of meningitis in babies:

- Fever
- Rapid breathing
- High pitched moaning
- Vomiting
- Irritability
- Drowsiness
- Pale in colour
- Rash
- Sore neck or arching of back
- Floppiness
- Blank staring

Signs and symptoms of meningitis in older children and adults:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Neck stiffness
- Vomiting
- Muscle and joint pains
- Drowsiness/confusion
- Rash

How is bacterial meningitis spread?

The bacteria that cause meningitis are common and are spread from person-to-person by respiratory secretions. Fortunately, these bacteria rarely cause illness. However, if immunity is low, you are at a higher risk.

What can be done to prevent people getting meningitis?

Most forms of meningitis cannot be prevented. However, vaccines are available for some important types of bacterial meningitis. Household contacts of patients with meningococcal meningitis are at an increased risk of meningococcal infection and are routinely offered antibiotics to kill any meningococcal bacteria that they may be carrying in their nose and throat.

Coma

Loss of consciousness

Lethargy

Dislike of Bright Lights

Meningitis Vaccines

Currently there are vaccines available to prevent Haemophilus influenza type B (known as Hib) pneumococcal and meningococcal types of bacterial meningitis.

The Hib vaccine has been in the routine childhood immunisation schedule since 1993. All Australian children should be vaccinated at 2, 4, 6 and 12 months of age under the National Immunisation Program. The vaccine has eliminated more than 95% of cases of Hib meningitis. Recent cases have occurred only in children who have not been fully immunised.

The conjugate pneumococcal vaccine is part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule and is given at 2, 4, and 6 months of age. It provides very long-term protection against the 13 most common sub-types of pneumococcal bacteria. Certain children are at higher risk of contracting pneumococcal disease, and require additional doses of vaccine. These include Immuno-compromised children, those with certain chronic diseases or abnormalities and aboriginal children. Day care attendance may also increase risk. It is the preferred vaccine for all children under 5 years of age, and is licensed for use in Australia for children 6 weeks to 9 years of age.

Polysaccharide pneumococcal vaccine may be used in children older than 2 years of age and adults. The vaccine is part of the recommended immunisation schedule for people 65 yrs of age or older, Indigenous people, those individuals with no spleen, immune disease or other high-risk medical conditions. It provides protection against the 23 sub-types most common in adults and older children, but of a shorter duration, and may require a "booster" dose after 5 years.

There are also conjugate and polysaccharide meningococcal vaccines available. The group C conjugate meningococcal vaccine is for all ages. It is only effective against group C meningococcal bacteria, which causes between 15% and 50% of meningococcal infections in Australia, depending on where you live. Meningococcal C vaccine is part of the routine immunisation schedule at 12 months.

The polysaccharide meningococcal vaccine provides 3 to 5 years protection against sub-groups A, C, W135 and Y. Routine vaccination is not recommended, but it is encouraged for persons older than 2 years with certain Immune defects, or with no spleen, or travelling to high-risk areas where outbreaks are frequent. These include Africa, the Middle East and Northern India. It is a visa requirement for pilgrims attending the Hajj in Saudi Arabia.

Hygiene

The viruses and bacteria that cause most cases of meningitis are spread by prolonged, close personal contact. However, if immunity is low, viral meningitis can spread quickly. In addition, thorough hand washing with soap and water may reduce the transmission of viruses in the household or in childcare facilities.

What should you do if you think someone might have Meningitis?

See your GP immediately. If your GP is not immediately available, go straight to the nearest hospital emergency department. If your GP or the hospital has reassured you, do not hesitate to return to the GP or hospital immediately if the symptoms worsen. Remember, meningitis can progress rapidly.

More Information

For information about The Meningitis Centre and how it can help you contact:

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Disclaimer:

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The Meningitis Centre's literature provides general information about meningitis, not medical advice. Please consult your doctor to discuss the information or if you are concerned someone may be ill.

Produced by The Meningitis Centre
Acknowledgements to Meningitis Research Foundation
& Meningitis Trust, UK.

Coma

Changing Moods

Dislike of Bright Lights

Drowsiness

Lethargy