

Meningitis

The thought of meningitis infection strikes fear into the hearts of all parents. But what is meningitis, and can anything be done about it?

The meninges are the tissues covering the brain & spinal cord. Meningitis is inflammation/infection of these linings. If the infection spreads into the blood, septicaemia develops.

Meningitis can be caused by various different organisms (or germs) - bacterial, viral or fungal.

Viral meningitis is the least serious form and although very unpleasant, with headache and high fever, is usually not life threatening and does not always require treatment in hospital. Fungal infection is relatively unusual.

That leaves bacterial meningitis, which can itself be caused by several different bacteria. It is always a serious infection, usually developing rapidly and requiring immediate medical attention. Recognising the symptoms and acting quickly can save lives.

Meningitis Research Foundation (MRF) estimates that around 3,400 people in the UK get bacterial meningitis each year. This is a relatively small number, but the serious nature of the infection makes it significant.

Who is most at risk?

Anyone can develop meningitis but babies, toddlers and young adults are at greatest risk.

Symptoms and signs of meningitis

The meningitis research organisations and charities have helplines and very good symptom guides (see links below).

The classic symptoms of meningitis are:

- headache
- vomiting
- neck stiffness
- aching limbs
- sensitivity to light (photophobia)
- high fever
- some people also develop a rash (See Tumbler Test below)

Babies and young children often don't show the classic symptoms listed above. They may refuse to eat or feed, become irritable (not wanting to be held or comforted), have an unusually high-pitched cry and possibly a bulging fontanelle (soft spot).

A major problem is that these are common symptoms of many different illnesses, so it can be very hard to recognise meningitis early.

However, it's important to remember that illness in a child is more likely to be due to common viral and ear, throat and chest infections.

As parents, we come to recognise the usual ways our children behave and react to illness and infection. So if your child becomes suddenly unwell in a pattern that seems unusual, deteriorates quickly, or you feel much more worried than you normally would, this could be a sign of a more serious illness. In such circumstances, always seek medical attention urgently.

The Tumbler Test

The meningitis rash looks like patches of bruises: purplish, dark and blotchy. The rash doesn't blanch (fade away) if a clear glass tumbler is pressed against it. Most viral rashes are lighter in colour, pinkish/red and will usually fade under the Tumbler Test.

This can be an indication of meningitis/septicaemia, although the rash doesn't always develop.

How can we protect against meningitis?

Meningitis is a notifiable disease, so the Health Protection Agency (HPA) is alerted by hospitals if a patient is diagnosed with meningitis. Through family, friends or schools the HPA offers preventative antibiotics to those who have been in close contact with meningitis.

Vaccines are available to protect against several, but not all forms of meningitis.

Routine baby immunisations include vaccines against three forms of infection which can cause meningitis. These are:

- Hib (Haemophilus influenza)
- Pneumococcal
- MenC (Meningococcal group C)

There is currently no vaccination to protect against Meningococcal Group B infection. This is because there are several forms of this bacteria and researchers are working hard to identify a reliable vaccine.

Summary

Meningitis remains a serious, life threatening infection. However, prevention with vaccines and public awareness of symptoms and signs enable infection to be recognised quickly so that treatment can be started as soon as possible to save lives.

Useful links:

www.meningitisuk.org
www.meningitis.org
www.meningitis-trust.org
www.patient.co.uk

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