

Meningitis in Babies Awareness Week 21-27 September 09 Press FAQ

Q. What are meningitis and septicaemia?

A: Meningitis and septicaemia can kill in hours. Meningitis is the inflammation of the lining around the brain and spinal cord. Septicaemia is the blood poisoning form of the disease. The two forms of the disease have different symptoms. People who recover from meningitis and septicaemia may be left with a range of after effects that dramatically alter their lives. Meningitis is usually bacterial or viral.

Viral meningitis can be very unpleasant but it is almost never life threatening and most people quickly make a full recovery. Bacterial meningitis is more serious and can be caused by a range of different bacteria. Most cases in the UK and Ireland are caused by meningococcal bacteria.

Meningococcal bacteria can cause meningitis, septicaemia or both. Most people who get the disease have some symptoms of both meningococcal meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia; together these two forms of the disease are known as meningococcal disease.

Septicaemia is the more life threatening form of the disease and is more dangerous when there are no signs of meningitis.

Q: Who is most at risk of developing meningitis and septicaemia?

A: Babies and children five are most at risk. Over 1000 babies under one become ill with meningitis and septicaemia every year in the UK*. The risk is 38 times higher for under ones compared to children and adults over one.

*Meningitis Research Foundation estimates there are over 3300 cases of meningitis and septicaemia every year in the UK.

Meningitis and septicaemia kill more children in the UK than any other infectious disease. About 2 deaths will occur almost every week in children under one. A quarter of those affected will be left with life-altering after effects as severe as brain damage, deafness and multiple amputations.

Q: Why are babies most at risk from meningitis and septicaemia?

A: A baby's immune system hasn't had time to develop fully which makes it harder for them to fight off meningitis causing bacteria if they come into contact with it. Bacteria can be passed from mother to baby during birth or just afterwards through very close contact.

Q: What are the symptoms in babies?

A: Look out for:

- A tense or bulging fontanelle (soft spot on the head).

- Breathing fast/difficulty breathing
- A high pitched or moaning cry
- A stiff body with jerky movements or else floppy and lifeless
- Cold hands and feet while the rest of the body has a fever
- A rash that does not fade when pressed with a glass tumbler
- Fever and vomiting
- Sleepy, vacant, difficult to wake.

Q: What should people do if they suspect a baby (or anyone) has meningitis?

A: Meningitis and septicaemia are deadly diseases which can kill in hours. If you suspect a case of meningitis, seek medical help immediately by the quickest route possible, whether this is by contacting your GP or phoning an ambulance.

Q: Isn't there a vaccine for meningitis?

A: There is no universal vaccine for all strains of meningitis. Vaccines provide protection against some strains but there is no vaccine for meningococcal group B (MenB) which causes 60% of cases in the UK. It's important to remember that the childhood vaccination schedule doesn't begin until a baby is two months old, and isn't complete until 13 months old so during this time in particular parents must be extra-vigilant for the symptoms of meningitis.

There are no vaccines for other forms of neonatal meningitis to which babies are more prone and therefore it is vital that parents know the symptoms.

Q: Who carries the bacteria which cause meningitis and septicaemia?

A: One in ten people at some point in their lives carry the bacteria harmlessly at the backs of their noses and throats. They pass from person to person through the exchange of tiny droplets of moisture in the breath. This happens through close or intimate contact such as kissing. The bacteria cannot live outside the body for longer than a few seconds.

Q: Is there a test for pregnant mothers to see if they're carrying meningitis bacteria?

A: Pregnant women can be tested to see if they're carrying a particular bacteria called Group B Streptococcal (GBS) which is carried in the birth canal and can cause meningitis in babies immediately after birth. This test isn't given as a matter of course so you'll have to ask your doctor or midwife about it. One in one thousand newborn babies develops GBS meningitis which kills 10% of sufferers.

There are no tests to show the presence of any other strains of meningitis, which is why it's even more important to be aware of the symptoms in babies.

Q: Is meningitis just a disease for babies?

A: Anyone of any age can catch meningitis, but babies and infants are most at-risk with 50 to 60% of all cases being in the under 5s. Babies under 12

months are particularly at risk. This is because their immune system has not had time to fully develop and they do not complete their vaccinations until 13 months so are more susceptible to the diseases.

Q: How can people find out about the symptoms of meningitis?

A: Contact Meningitis Research Foundation.

- Our **FREE** 24-hour helpline – **080 8800 3344** - provides support and information for anyone with concerns about meningitis. Trained staff and nurses are on-hand to offer support and information.
- Text **MRF** to **82088** to receive symptoms information on your mobile phone. You'll always have it with you and it might just save a life. Costs one standard text message charge plus minimal data download charge.
- Visit our website www.meningitis.org for symptoms information and to order free awareness literature online.