

Meningitis Research Foundation
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Opportunities to prevent serious neonatal infections are being missed in hospitals

Babies run the highest risk of meningitis, say national charities Meningitis Research Foundation and Group B Strep Support. The risk is 40 times higher for babies under 12 months of age compared to children older than one, and adults.

The most common cause of neonatal meningitis – Group B Streptococcus (GBS) is the biggest cause of life threatening infection in newborn babies, also causing septicaemia (blood poisoning) and pneumonia. Early onset GBS can be prevented in newborn babies by giving antibiotics to at-risk mothers during labour. An initial study conducted with data obtained from 202 of 222 Neonatal Units in the UK and Republic of Ireland demonstrates that antibiotic administration varied across the units.* Despite longstanding recommendations on preventing Group B Strep, many ‘at-risk’ mothers are never offered antibiotics, nor even told about GBS. Up to half of current cases of GBS in newborns could be prevented if guidelines were followed**.

MRF’s Scotland Manager Mary Millar commented: “MRF is very concerned by the lack of awareness of GBS infection and the potential inconsistencies in the treatment of the disease. Therefore, we are launching a new research project to improve recognition and treatment of meningitis in the youngest babies, in whom the outcome is so devastating”.

Dr Paul Heath, chief investigator on the project at St George’s University of London said: “The early treatment of meningitis in babies appears to vary widely across the UK. This project will investigate healthcare delivery and look for ways to improve management of meningitis in newborn babies. We hope to develop best practice guidelines that will make a real difference.”

Adalaine Bryson from Dundee tells us about her son Ellis who developed GBS at 6 days old: “The doctors were inserting lines into him to administer the antibiotics; it was 2am before we were told it was likely to be a form of meningitis, probably Group B Strep. This was the first time we had heard of this type. We were told he was very sick and the next 48 hours were critical and that there was a high chance he could be left brain damaged. We were told it was passed from mother to baby during delivery”.

If you are concerned simply call MRF’s **FREEfone** 24-hour helpline – **080 8800 3344**. Trained staff and nurses are on-hand to talk through any aspect of the diseases – from information on recognising the symptoms, to befriending for those whose lives have been affected by meningitis.

This information is also available by SMS text message – text **MRF** to **82088** to receive symptoms information on your mobile. It costs just one text message and minimal data download charges, and could help save a life.

Media Contact:

Mary Millar (Meningitis Research Foundation) 0131 510 2345

Jane Plumb (Group B Strep Support) on 01444 416176 or 07981 742989

- * Heath P T, Fernando, A M R and Menson, E N (January 2008) "Antimicrobial policies in the neonatal units of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland", Journal of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy 61, 743-745.
- ** Heath, Vergnano et al, (May 2009) "Missed opportunities for preventing GBS infections", Disease in Childhood – Fetal and Neonatal Edition.

Notes to Editor:

To hear more from Adalaine Bryson about how her baby Ellis Muir recovered from Group B strep meningitis please follow the link below:

<http://www.meningitis.org/book-of-experience/adalaine-bryson-31846>



Other symptoms in babies include: tense or bulging fontanelle (soft spot); blotchy skin, getting paler or turning blue; refusing to feed; irritable when picked up, with a high pitched or moaning cry; a stiff body with jerky movements or else floppy and lifeless.

Symptoms of meningitis:

Severe headache; Stiff neck*; Dislike of bright lights*; Fever/vomiting; Drowsy and less responsive/vacant; Rash; Seizures (fits) may also be seen. (*unusual in young children)

Symptoms of septicaemia:

(This form of the illness often starts with non-specific flu-like symptoms):

Rash; fever/vomiting; cold hands and feet/shivering; limb/joint/muscle pain; abdominal pain (sometimes with diarrhoea); pale or mottled skin; rapid or unusual breathing, drowsy and less responsive/vacant.

- Meningitis Research Foundation is currently funding 24 research projects into the prevention, detection and treatment of meningitis and septicaemia. The Foundation has spent £15.6 million on research since its inception in 1989.
- Meningitis Research Foundation operates a **Freefone** 24 hour helpline – **080 8800 3344** – providing information on meningitis and septicaemia to the general public and health professionals.
- Information on meningitis and septicaemia is also available on the Foundation's world-renowned website – **www.meningitis.org** – in 22 languages. An interpretation service in 150 languages is available through the 24-hour helpline.
- The Foundation offers support for those affected by meningitis and septicaemia. Trained helpline staff are available 365 days a year. A befriender service links people with experience of meningitis and septicaemia to share their experiences and counsel each other.

Group B Strep Support:

- Group B Strep Support (GBSS) is a UK charity set up to prevent GBS infection in newborn babies, following the death of Jane & Robert Plumb's middle child, Theo, from GBS in 1996..
- Group B Strep (GBS) is a normal bacteria carried by up to 30% of adults which can be passed from mother to

baby during labour. For most babies this causes no problems: for others it's deadly, causing blood poisoning and meningitis. A reliable test to check for GBS late in pregnancy, routinely used in the USA and elsewhere, is only available privately in the UK

- Babies at higher risk of developing GBS infection are those where: the waters have gone more than 18 hours before delivery; Mum has a high temperature in labour; her waters break before 37 weeks of pregnancy; the baby is preterm (born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy); GBS has been found from a urine sample or vaginal swab taken from the mum during the current pregnancy; or where Mum has previously had a baby who developed GBS infection.
- Further information on group B Strep is available from www.gbss.org.uk and during office hours by phone on **01444 416176**.
- GBSS offers information and support to those affected by group B Strep during pregnancy and in babies first three months of life.