

Bacterial meningitis

Children's Ward

Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet is for people who may have bacterial meningitis. It gives information on what it is and how it can be treated.

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection that causes inflammation (swelling) of the meninges. The meninges are protective membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord. If not treated in time, meningitis can be very serious.

What causes meningitis?

Lots of different organisms can cause meningitis. The most common ones are bacteria and viruses. Bacterial meningitis is less common but usually more serious than viral meningitis. Many different types of bacteria, such as *Neisseria meningitidis* or *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, can cause meningitis.

How do doctors know if I have meningitis?

Doctors may think you may have meningitis if you have symptoms of it. The symptoms may include:

- Fever – a high temperature
- Being sick
- Feeling very sleepy, finding it difficult to wake up
- Confusion and feeling irritable
- Severe muscle pain
- Pale blotchy skin
- Rash (see section 'The rash')
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck – you may be unable to touch your chin to your chest
- Dislike of bright lights
- Fits, seizures

The rash

One of the most distinctive symptoms of meningitis is a non-blanching rash. Non-blanching means that the rash does not fade when you press a glass against it (see figure 1).

If you have a non-blanching rash and a fever (high temperature), it is a medical emergency. Get medical help immediately.



Figure 1 – a non-blanching rash (Photo courtesy of the Meningitis Research Foundation)

However, the rash can appear late in the illness or not at all, so if you have the other symptoms, do not wait for a rash to appear before going to the doctor.

To find out if you definitely have bacterial meningitis, doctors may do a test called a lumbar puncture. For this, a sample of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) is taken from the base of the spine and checked to see if there are bacteria or viruses in it. CSF is the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. If you have this test, you will be given a local anaesthetic to numb the area first.

How did I get meningitis?

Anyone can get meningitis but young children and babies are the most at risk. Teenagers and young adults are the next most at risk group. Many people carry the bacteria that cause meningitis without becoming ill as their immune system keeps it in check.

The bacteria can be passed from person to person by close contact, coughing, sneezing and kissing. Sometimes when the bacteria get in, the immune system is not strong enough to stop the person getting ill.

But I have been vaccinated against meningitis....

Children and young people are vaccinated for various bacteria that can cause meningitis. However, there are still a number of bacteria for which there are currently no effective vaccines.

What is the treatment?

Meningitis can make you ill very quickly so if the doctor thinks you have it, they will begin treatment immediately. This may be before they have the results of the tests. You will be given antibiotics either by injection or by using a little plastic tube called a cannula.

You will need to stay in hospital for a few days to continue receiving antibiotics through a cannula directly into a vein (one of your blood vessels).

What happens after bacterial meningitis?

Most children recover fully after getting bacterial meningitis. However, some people who get it have problems afterwards. This is because this type of meningitis can damage parts of the brain.

The most common problems are loss of sight or hearing, or speech problems. Some people may also develop epilepsy.

Hearing

All children who have had meningitis will be offered a hearing test within four weeks of their recovery. Any loss of hearing after meningitis usually happens early so you may notice it before the hearing test.

Hearing can change or get worse in the first few months after meningitis but should not get any worse after that period. Therefore, you will be given another hearing test during the first few months.

Eyesight

Many people have temporary eyesight problems after meningitis due to swelling of the optic nerve after meningitis. This usually improves over time. If it does not improve, you should go to your GP to be referred to an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) for more treatment and support.

Will other people in my family get meningitis?

Most cases of meningitis are isolated which means that they only affect one person. However, close contacts such as parents, brothers and sisters, may be given antibiotics. This will help kill bacteria that they may be carrying, to help prevent them from getting it.

If you have a type of bacteria that there is a vaccine against, members of your family may be offered the vaccine.

If someone else in your school gets the same type of meningitis as you, the staff and other children may also be offered antibiotics.

A note about viral meningitis

Viral meningitis is caused by a virus instead of bacteria. It can have many of the same symptoms but is not usually as serious. It usually gets better by itself and as it is a virus, antibiotics will not be effective against it. However, you may be given antibiotics at first anyway if the doctors are not yet sure if it is viral or bacterial meningitis.

Can I find out more?

Meningitis Now

Information about meningitis and the work of Meningitis Now.

www.meningitisnow.org

Their online information resources:

<https://www.meningitisnow.org/how-we-help/resources/read-our-information-online/>

If you have any questions or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

Children's Ward on 01384 244271

Russells Hall Hospital switchboard number: 01384 456111

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/c2-childrens-ward/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet, please email patient.information@dgh.nhs.uk

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

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Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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