

Meningitis Factsheet



What is Meningitis?

The word “Meningitis” means an inflammation of the membranes (meninges) surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Infection is the most common cause of meningitis. Every year about 1 million* people worldwide are affected by meningitis. Infectious meningitis is caused by many different germs: viruses, bacteria, parasites and fungi.

- Viral meningitis is the most common kind of meningitis, and usually the least severe type. Most patients recover without any permanent damage, although full recovery can sometimes take many weeks or months.
- Bacterial meningitis is more serious and can lead to permanent disability or death. Those surviving meningitis can be left with long-term effects such as deafness, brain damage, learning difficulties, behavioural problems, memory loss and when blood poisoning (septicaemia) is involved, scarring and/or loss of limbs.
 - Bacterial meningitis is mainly due to three major bacterial infections: *Neisseria meningitidis* (or meningococcus), *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (or *pneumococcus*) and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (or Hib).
- Other causes of meningitis, such as fungi or parasites, cause severe infections but occur far less frequently than viral or bacterial meningitis.

Meningitis can develop rapidly over a few hours. For this reason, prompt diagnosis and treatment is critical. If you are concerned about someone you know, seek urgent medical attention.

Symptoms

Meningitis is not always easy to recognise. In the early stages in young children and adolescents, the symptoms can be like a common cold or flu. The early signs and symptoms are fever, irritability and/or sleepiness, being pale with cold hands and feet, aches and pains (severe leg or joint pain), and no interest in food. The classic signs of meningitis (headache, stiff neck, limited reaction to surroundings, in babies: bulging fontanelle (soft spot on the head in babies), blank staring look and limpness) are important later symptoms. Sometimes a rash appears, first looking like small blood spots, later as larger bruises. The disease can progress very rapidly over 6 to 18 hours from what looks like a typical viral infection to severe illness.

Who's at risk?

Meningitis can affect anyone at any age. About half of bacterial meningitis cases occur in children under the age of five with infants at greatest risk. A second meningococcal disease peak occurs in adolescents and young adults. Adults and the elderly have an increased risk of meningitis (mainly caused by pneumococcus). People over the age of 65 have an especially high risk of dying from it.

Both adults and children with a weakened immune system have a higher risk of infection, as are those who have skipped routine recommended vaccinations.

Prevention

Prevention of bacterial meningitis is key. Effective vaccines are available to protect us from the most common causes of bacterial meningitis – Hib, pneumococcal and most strains of meningococcal diseases. MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccines are useful against these infections that can lead to viral meningitis.

The best way to prevent meningitis is by being fully vaccinated with the schedule recommended in the country where you live. It is very important to make sure that all of the recommended doses are given in full and on time, for the best possible protection. New vaccines are being developed to protect against other common causes of meningitis. There are as yet no vaccines to protect us from fungal and parasitic meningitis.

*Note: This is an estimate only. Reliable surveillance and accurate laboratory diagnosis is not available in many countries, making it difficult to identify the exact number of bacterial meningitis cases and death