What is meningitis?

- The inflammation of the membranes that protect the brain and spinal cord.
- It affects more than 2.8 million people globally each year.
- Anyone of any age can be affected; infants, young children, adolescents and older people are at greatest risk.
- Meningitis and septicaemia can kill within 24 hours; survivors can be left with complex disabilities such as deafness, amputations and cerebral palsy.

What are the symptoms?

Not all strains of meningitis are vaccine preventable, so being able to recognise the symptoms is crucial. If you think you spot the signs of meningitis, seek help immediately.

**AT ANY AGE**

- Fever
- Pale or blotchy skin
- Rapid breathing
- Seizures, fits or convulsions
- Irritability, drowsiness or difficulty waking

**BABIES/INFANTS:**

- Loss of appetite
- Bulging fontanelle (soft spot on head)
- Neck retraction
- Unusual high-pitched cry
- Wariness of being handled

**OLDER CHILDREN/ADULTS:**

- Cold hands and feet
- Listless, less responsive
- Blank, staring expression
- Vomiting and/or diarrhoea
- Rash or spots that don’t fade with pressure*

*Not everyone who contracts meningitis will get a rash. Don’t wait for a rash to appear before getting help.

What causes meningitis?

**BACTERIAL MENINGITIS**

- Requires immediate medical attention.
- Less likely to result in death if treated early. Even with prompt diagnosis and treatment, up to 20% of patients will die and up to 30% of survivors acquire life-long disabilities.
- The main types of bacterial meningitis are meningococcal, pneumococcal, Group B streptococcal, E.coli, Hib and TB.
- These bacteria can be spread by droplets and secretions from the nose and mouth.

**VIRAL MENINGITIS**

- Can be caused by many different types of viruses and can be passed from person to person.
- Most people are exposed to these viruses at some point in their life but do not go on to develop meningitis.
- Usually the least severe, but full recovery may take several weeks or months.
- Some types of viral meningitis can be prevented by vaccination, but currently no vaccines protect against non-polio enteroviruses, the most common cause of viral meningitis.

**FUNGAL MENINGITIS**

- Uncommon, though fungal meningitis caused by cryptococcosis infection is one of the most common causes of meningitis in adults in Africa.
- Most cases occur in people with weakened immune systems.
- Vaccines are not available to protect against it and it is not contagious.

**PARASITIC MENINGITIS**

- Uncommon in humans
- Not contagious; infection occurs by ingesting a parasite.
- In some countries parasites such as malaria can cause meningitis.

What can I do to protect myself?

- There are safe and effective vaccines that protect against the most common causes of bacterial meningitis, including Hib, pneumococcal and most strains of meningococcal. Not all strains are vaccine preventable so awareness of symptoms is key.
- Multiple vaccines are needed for protection because of the variety of bacteria and viruses that can cause it. There is no single ‘meningitis vaccine’; the most effective way to prevent the most common causes of meningitis is to receive all available vaccines.
- Currently available vaccines could prevent more than 90% of cases of bacterial meningitis.
- Some types of viral meningitis can be prevented by vaccination. For example, the MMR vaccine can protect against viral meningitis as it protects against mumps and measles.