

Meningococcal disease

Is a rare but life-threatening disease caused by meningococcal bacteria which are divided into several groups. The most common are A, B, C, W and Y. Infants, young children, teenagers and young adults have the highest risk of meningococcal disease.



Since 2009 there has been a year on year increase in the number of cases of meningococcal W (MenW) disease and there is no sign of the numbers declining. Older teenagers and young adults are more at risk of getting meningitis and septicaemia from MenW. A catch – up programme offering a MenACWY vaccination to every pupil from years 10 to 13 is starting in general practice from late August and in schools for years 10 and 11 from September 2015 onwards. The MenACWY vaccine will also replace the teenage MenC vaccine usually offered to year 9 or 10 students and become the routine vaccination for teenagers.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal bacteria can cause meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain) and septicaemia (blood poisoning). Both diseases are very serious and can kill, especially if not diagnosed early. The early symptoms of meningococcal disease are similar to those of flu, so you need to be able to recognise the symptoms very quickly (even if you have been vaccinated, the vaccines offered through the routine immunisation programme do not protect against all forms of the disease).

A full description of the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia can be found at www.meningitis.org and www.meningitisnow.org.



What causes meningococcal disease?

There are five main groups of meningococcal bacteria that can cause meningitis and septicaemia – A, B, C, W and Y. The same bacteria that cause this serious disease are also commonly carried in the back of the nose and throat, especially in young adults.

Look out for any of these symptoms

- **Fever, cold hands and feet**
- **Vomiting and diarrhoea**
- **Drowsiness, difficult to wake up**
- **Irritability and/or confusion**
- **Dislike of bright lights**
- **Severe headache or muscle pains**
- **Pale, blotchy skin with or without a rash**
- **Convulsions/seizures**
- **Stiff neck**

How common is it?

Meningococcal group C disease is now rare since MenC vaccination was introduced to the national immunisation programme in 1999. MenB is now the most common cause of meningococcal disease in children and young adults, while MenW and MenY used to mainly cause serious illness in older adults. Since 2009, however, there has been a large increase in MenW disease in England, resulting in several deaths among infants and teenagers. From September 2015, MenB vaccine will become part of the routine infant programme to help protect young babies.

Why do I need to get the vaccine?

As an older teenager, you become at higher risk of getting MenW meningococcal disease, so you need to get vaccinated to protect yourself. Vaccination also reduces the risk of you carrying the bacteria and so protects other people around you. This should, in turn, prevent the numbers increasing to serious levels. You may have had a MenC vaccination as a baby and again more recently but this will not protect you against other meningococcal groups. The MenACWY vaccine will increase your protection against MenC and help to protect you against three other

meningococcal groups (A, W and Y). It is still important to know the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia because there are many other bacteria that can also cause these illnesses, including the group B strain that is not covered by this vaccination.

When will I get the vaccination?

It's recommended that all teenagers in school years 10 to 13 have the MenACWY vaccination before or soon after they leave school. The catch – up programme will start in August 2015 and end in around October 2017. With so many pupils to vaccinate, the programme will be rolled out gradually, with year 13 pupils offered the vaccine first. These older teenagers are at greatest risk of the disease especially when starting university where they will come into contact with many new people of a similar age. In addition, all year 10 students (and year 11 students in some areas) will be offered the MenACWY vaccine routinely instead of the MenC vaccine.

Do I have to have it?

All vaccinations in the UK are voluntary but it's recommended that everybody in this age group has the MenACWY vaccine to help protect themselves and others, such as young infants, who may be particularly susceptible to this disease. You, or your parent/guardian, have to consent to have the vaccine.

What if I want the vaccination but my parents don't agree?

If you can show that you understand the benefits and risks of MenACWY vaccination, you can consent to have the vaccine. But it's hoped that you will discuss the matter as a family and come to a shared decision.

What if I want more information before consenting?

If you feel you need more information about any aspect of vaccination you or your parents can always speak to the nurse or GP. You can also call the NHS helpline 111 or contact the meningitis charities listed at end of this leaflet.

Is the vaccine safe?

The vaccine has been used for many years across the world and has an excellent safety record. Serious side effects from the vaccine are rare.

Does the vaccination hurt?

What are the common side effects?

It's like a sting. You may get soreness and some redness and swelling in your arm after the injection - you may also get a headache, but these symptoms should disappear after one or two days. If you feel unwell at any time after vaccination, you should contact your GP.

Do the glass test

Someone with septicaemia may develop a few spots or a widespread rash with fever. Later on the rash can develop into purple blotches that do not fade under pressure. You can do a test for this by pressing the side of a drinking glass against the rash. If you have a fever and a rash, and the rash does not fade under pressure, get medical help immediately by calling 999 or getting someone to take you to the nearest hospital emergency department. Never wait for a rash, though. It can be a late sign or may not appear at all. If someone is ill and getting worse get medical help immediately.



Meningitis and septicaemia are very serious and require urgent attention.

If you think you've got either, get help immediately and make sure your fellow students know to look out for you and each other.

How can I find out more?

There is more information about the MenACWY vaccination on the NHS Choices website at www.nhs.uk/conditions/Meningitis/Pages/Introduction.aspx or you can talk to your GP, nurse or university health centre if you have any questions.

The following charities also provide information, advice and support:

Meningitis Now

Freephone Meningitis Helpline
0808 80 10 388
9am to 10pm every day
www.meningitisnow.org

Meningitis Research Foundation

Free helpline 080 8800 3344
(9am to 10pm weekdays, 10am to 8pm weekends and holidays)
www.meningitis.org