Meningitis: what is it and how do I protect against it?

Meningitis is the swelling of the lining around the brain and spinal cord (the meninges) and is usually caused by a bacterial, fungal or viral infection.

It can be a life-threatening infection so, if you suspect meningitis, always trust your instincts and get professional medical help fast.

Did you know?

Making the World Health Organization's Global Road Map to Defeat Meningitis by 2030 a reality will eliminate bacterial meningitis epidemics, reduce disability and save the lives of more than 920,000 people by 2030.

Around 1 in 3 of all meningitis deaths are in children under five.

Who is at risk of meningitis?

Anyone can get meningitis, but various factors can increase the risk:

Age: babies, under 5s, teens, young adults and the over 65s.

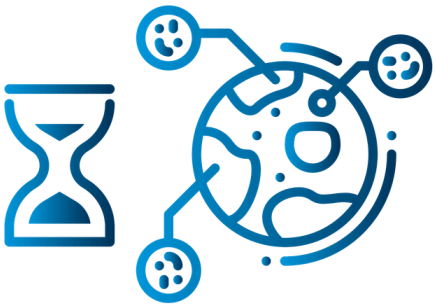
Medical health: people with underlying health issues, such as problems with their immune system.

Close contact: those who have spent time in close proximity with people who have meningitis caused by certain bacterial infections.

Environmental factors: including mass gatherings and smoke and dust exposure.

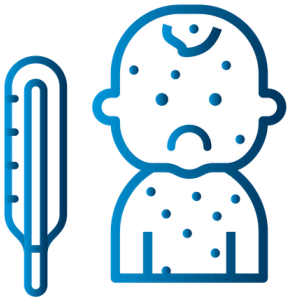
Location: some countries have higher rates of meningitis.

Types of meningitis...



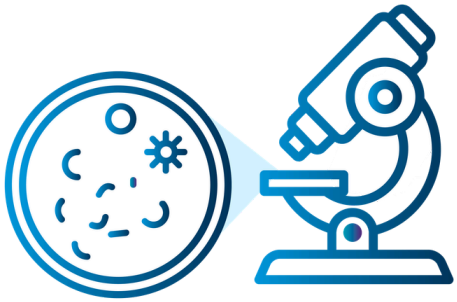
Bacterial meningitis

strikes suddenly, can kill within hours, and can cause life-long disabilities including hearing loss, brain injury and epilepsy. You can protect against most strains of bacterial meningitis by being up to date with your vaccinations. Speak to your local health professional team to check what vaccines are available to you to protect against meningitis.



Viral meningitis

is not usually life-threatening, but it may cause short-term (or more rarely) life-long after effects such as memory loss. Many different viruses can cause viral meningitis, including mumps, measles and influenza. Most people are exposed to at least some of the viruses that cause viral meningitis during their lifetime without developing meningitis.



Fungal meningitis

can develop after a fungal infection reaches the brain or spinal cord. Some causes of fungal meningitis include *Cryptococcus*, *Histoplasma*, *Blastomyces*, *Coccidioides*, and *Candida*. Although anyone can get fungal meningitis, people with weakened immune systems are most at risk.

worldmeningitisday.org

Show your support on social media - **#WorldMeningitisDay**

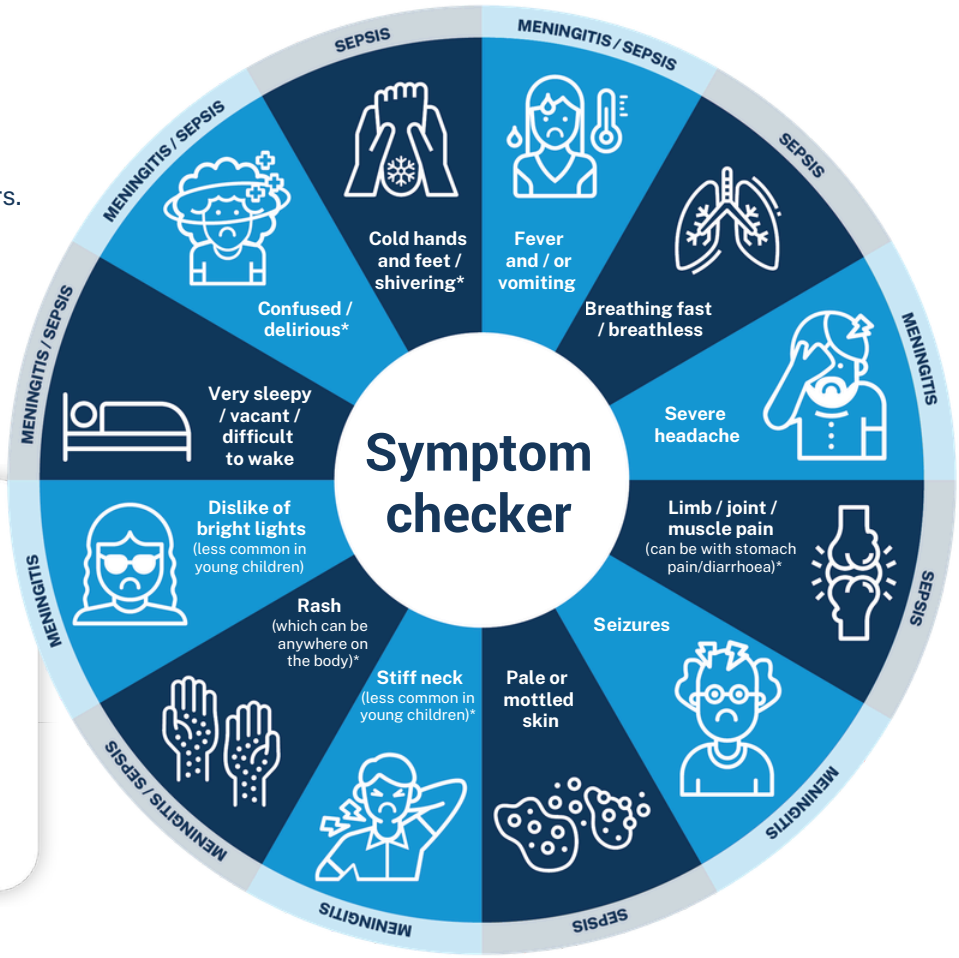
Meningitis: the symptoms to watch out for

Invasive meningococcal disease is a leading cause of bacterial meningitis across the world. People with invasive meningococcal disease can have both meningitis and sepsis. Both are very serious infections which can kill in hours.

Sepsis symptoms can appear early in a case of invasive meningococcal disease, so being aware of the symptoms for both meningitis and sepsis can save lives and ensure people get life-saving treatment fast.

Remember:

- These symptoms can appear in any order.
- Not everyone gets all symptoms.
- Don't wait for a rash to appear: a very ill person needs medical help even if there are only a few spots or no rash.
- **Trust your instincts and always get medical help fast.**



How to protect against meningitis

Get vaccinated

Meningitis vaccinations are the safest way to be protected, and some reduce the chance of infections spreading in communities.

Know the symptoms

There are many different causes of meningitis and not all can be prevented by vaccination. Know the symptoms so you know when to get urgent, professional medical help and, if you suspect someone is ill with meningitis, always trust your instincts.

Play your part

Check the people in your family and community are up to date with their meningitis vaccinations, know the symptoms to watch out for, and know when to get urgent medical help.

Support defeating meningitis

Support World Meningitis Day on 5th October by downloading and sharing the free, life-saving resources available now at **worldmeningitisday.org.**

For more on meningitis and sepsis symptoms, including for babies and young children

SCAN ME

© Meningitis Research Foundation, CC-BY 2025

worldmeningitisday.org

Show your support on social media - **#WorldMeningitisDay**

WORLD MENINGITIS DAY 5th October worldmeningitisday.org

CONFEDERATION OF MENINGITIS ORGANISATIONS CoMO