



# Meningitis, septicaemia and meningococcal disease

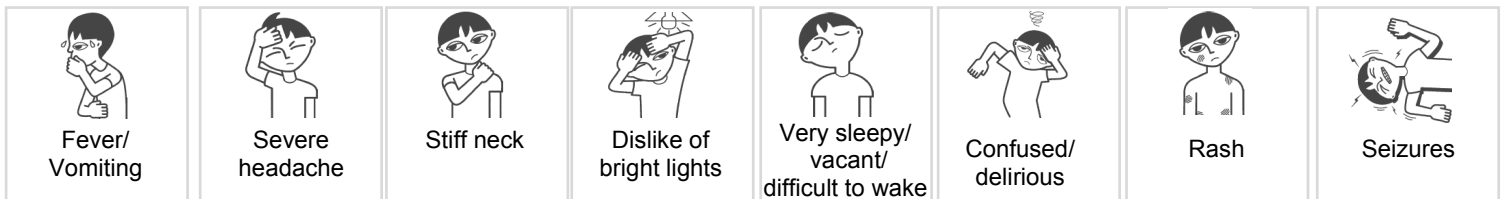
Symptoms of meningitis, septicaemia and meningococcal disease can occur in any order.

Not everyone gets all the symptoms.

**Trust your instincts - get medical help quickly if you are worried.**

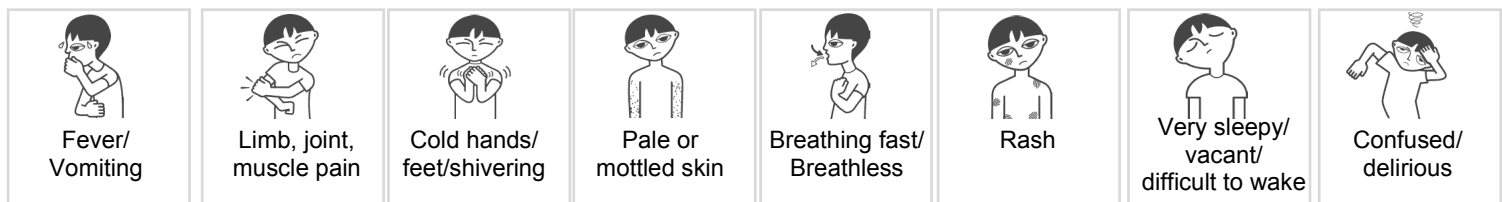
## What is meningitis?

- Meningitis is an infection of the lining of the brain and spinal cord (the meninges) and is most often caused by viruses or bacteria:
  - ⇒ Viral meningitis is usually milder than bacterial meningitis and is rarely fatal. Most people recover within 5 to 14 days without any medical treatment.
  - ⇒ Bacterial meningitis is more severe. It can be life threatening and it requires medical attention quickly.
- Anyone can get meningitis; however, babies, young children and teenagers are mainly affected.
- As the early symptoms for both viral and bacterial meningitis can be very similar, it is important to contact your GP or GP out-of-hours service if you are concerned. If you cannot contact them, or they are unable to see the patient urgently, bring the patient to the nearest Emergency Department. Symptoms may include:



## What is septicaemia (blood poisoning)?

- Septicaemia is caused when certain bacteria enter the bloodstream releasing poisons which make you feel unwell and feverish.
- They also damage the walls of blood vessels, causing blood to leak all over your body. This shows up on the skin as a rash which may start as tiny blood spots that look like red pin-prick type marks. These marks do not fade when a glass is pressed to the skin (glass test) and, if untreated, can spread to form bruises or blood blisters.
- The rash is not the only symptom of septicaemia, so do not wait for it to appear before getting medical help. It may be the last symptom to appear and can spread very quickly.
- Symptoms of septicaemia can appear in any order and may include:



## Additional symptoms to look out for in babies:

- Unusual grunting sounds
- Irritable when picked up, with a high pitched or moaning cry
- Tense or bulging soft spot (on the head)
- Stiff body with jerky movements, or floppy and lifeless
- Refusing to feed
- If under 3 months there is often no fever

*The Meningitis Baby Watch picture on page 2 of this leaflet has a full list of symptoms to look out for in babies*

## What is meningococcal disease?

- Meningococcal disease is a life-threatening bacterial infection. It is a term used to describe two major illnesses, meningitis and septicaemia, which can occur on their own but often occur together.
- It is caused by the *Neisseria meningitidis* bacterium.
- There are several different strains of this bacterium, including groups A, B, C, W135 and Y. Groups B and C are the strains most commonly seen in Ireland.
- It is most common from September to April, but can occur at any time.

## How is bacterial meningitis and meningococcal disease spread?

- These infections do not spread easily from person to person - close and fairly prolonged contact is needed.
- The infections are usually spread by people who are not sick themselves, but who are carrying the germs in the back of their nose or throat. The germs can be coughed out and breathed in, or may be transferred in saliva, for example during prolonged or intimate kissing. They are not spread through water or food.

## When are antibiotics needed?

- People diagnosed with bacterial meningitis and meningococcal disease need urgent antibiotic treatment. Antibiotics are also given to their close contacts.
- People diagnosed with viral meningitis will not routinely be given antibiotics and most people recover within 5 to 14 days without any medical treatment. Their close contacts will not need antibiotics.

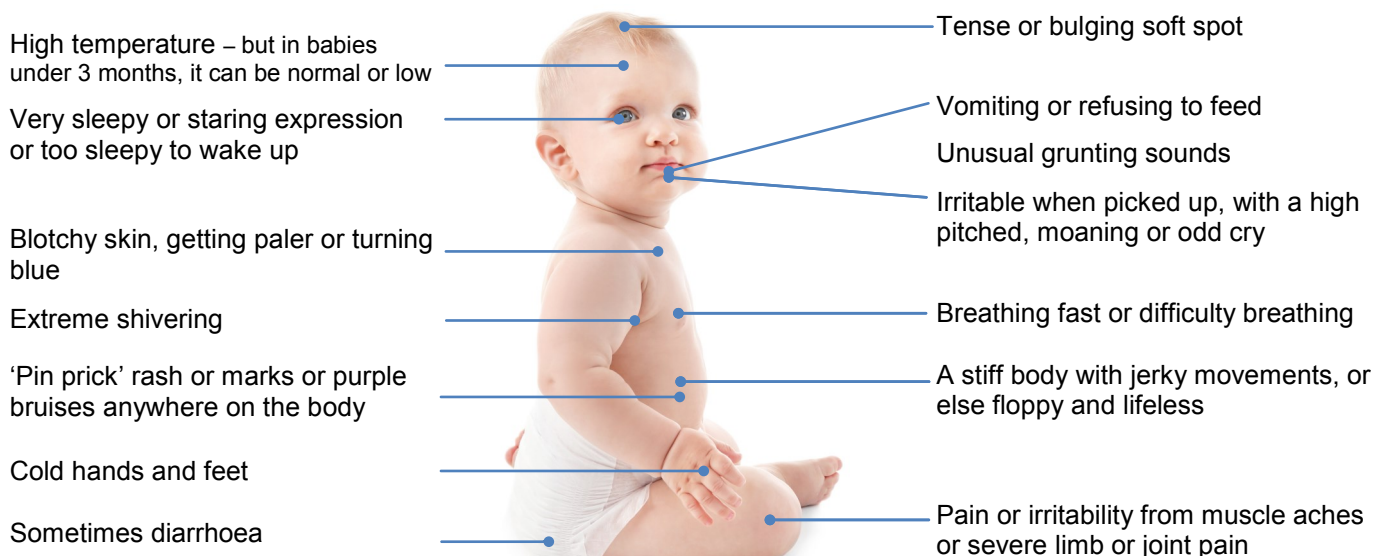
## Can bacterial meningitis and meningococcal disease be treated and cured?

- Yes - the earlier the diagnosis, the earlier treatment with antibiotics can begin and therefore the greater chance that the person will make a full recovery.
- Early diagnosis is the key so if you suspect that someone may have meningitis or meningococcal disease seek medical attention immediately.

## Vaccination and prevention of meningococcal disease:

- There are several different types of meningococcal bacteria, including groups A, B, C, W135 and Y.
- Vaccines for groups B and C are part of the primary childhood immunisation schedule in Ireland.
  - ⇒ **Group C:** In October 2000 the meningococcal group C conjugate vaccine (MenC) was introduced in Ireland to the infant immunisation schedule and is currently given at 6 months of age. Children also receive a booster at 13 months and as a teenager.
  - ⇒ **Group B:** Meningococcal group B is responsible for 80-85% of meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia cases in Ireland each year. Meningitis B vaccine is now part of the infant immunisation schedule for babies born on or after 1st October 2016. It is given at 2, 4 and 12 months of age.
- The best way to prevent meningitis is to **ensure your child is up to date with all their vaccines**. If you have any concerns that they may have missed vaccines, please discuss with your GP or practice nurse.
- But remember that vaccines do not prevent every kind of meningitis, so if your child has symptoms that suggest meningitis or septicaemia, get medical help urgently.

### Meningitis Baby Watch: Is your baby getting worse fast? Babies can get ill very quickly, so check often:



Not every baby gets all these symptoms and symptoms can appear in any order.

If you feel "something is wrong", **get medical help quickly**.

Thank you to *The Meningitis Research Foundation* ([www.meningitis.org](http://www.meningitis.org)) for allowing us to use their symptom alert, "glass test" & Baby Watch images & text.