

Tot watch

Meningitis and
septicaemia/sepsis
**Higher risk for
young children**



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**Meningitis
Research
Foundation**

What every parent and carer should know

If you have a child under five years old, you need to be aware of meningitis and septicaemia (also known as sepsis*) because children in this age group are more at risk than older children and adults. Meningococcal bacteria are the leading cause of life-threatening meningitis amongst children in the UK and Ireland. This bug kills more children under five than any other infectious disease. Even children who survive may be left with life-changing disabilities from learning difficulties and behavioural problems to hearing loss and amputations.

Fortunately, most children have natural resistance to the bugs that cause meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis and vaccines give excellent protection against many forms. But not all forms can be prevented, so it's very important that everyone is aware of the signs and symptoms.

Meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis can be hard to recognise, especially in small children who get lots of minor illnesses with similar symptoms and can't explain how they are feeling.

But these diseases can kill in hours so trust your instincts and seek urgent medical help if you suspect meningitis or septicaemia/sepsis.













What are meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis?

Meningitis is inflammation of the lining around the brain and spinal cord - the meninges. Septicaemia/sepsis is blood poisoning, and is the more life-threatening form of the disease.

* Sepsis and septicaemia are both words used by doctors to describe a life threatening reaction to an infection

Symptoms to watch out for

The first symptoms are usually fever, vomiting, headache and feeling unwell. **Red ticks show symptoms that are more specific to meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis and less common in milder illnesses.** Limb pain, pale skin and cold hands and feet often appear earlier than the rash, neck stiffness, dislike of bright lights and confusion.

	Septicaemia/ sepsis	Meningitis
Fever and/or vomiting 	✓	✓
Severe headache 		✓
Limb/joint/ muscle pain <small>(sometimes stomach pain/diarrhoea)</small> 	✓	
Cold hands and feet/shivering 	✓	
Pale or mottled skin 	✓	
Breathing fast/ breathless 	✓	
Rash <small>(anywhere on the body)</small> 	✓	✓
Stiff neck <small>(less common in young children)</small> 		✓
Dislike of bright lights <small>(less common in young children)</small> 		✓
Very sleepy/ vacant/difficult to wake 	✓	✓
Confused/ delirious 	✓	✓
Seizures (fits) may also be seen 		✓

Other signs in babies

- Unusual grunting sounds
- Tense or bulging soft spot on their head
- Refusing to feed
- Irritable when picked up, with a high pitched or moaning cry
- A stiff body with jerky movements, or else floppy and lifeless
- Fever is often absent in babies less than three months of age

The Tumbler Test

If you are seriously worried about a child who is ill, **don't wait for a rash to appear – get medical help.** But if your child is ill and gets a new rash or spots, use the Tumbler Test.

Press a clear glass tumbler firmly against the rash. If you can see the marks clearly through the glass **seek urgent medical help immediately.**

Check the entire body. Look out for tiny red or brown pin-prick marks which can change into larger red or purple blotches and blood blisters.

The darker the skin the harder it is to see a septicaemic rash so check lighter areas like palms of hands and soles of the feet or look inside the eyelids and the roof of the mouth.



Things to remember

- Don't wait for a rash as it doesn't always appear
- Not everyone gets all of these symptoms
- Symptoms can appear in any order
- Septicaemia/sepsis can occur with or without meningitis
- You know your child best; check on them often, trust your instincts and act fast.

How can I protect my children from meningitis?

The single most effective thing you can do to protect your children from meningitis is to make sure they are fully immunised. Every injection in the routine immunisation programme for babies protects against some form of meningitis. Booster vaccines are not just a top-up. Vaccines given after 12 months of age are very important. Without these immunisations your child's protection will be short lived.

But since not all forms of meningitis can be prevented, it's important you know the symptoms. That way you can recognise the disease in time to get medical help if your child is affected.

Trust your instincts

You know your child best - you are with them every day. You are the best person to spot the difference in behaviour or in the sound of a cry. Remember, meningitis and septicaemia strike fast. If you think your child is seriously ill get medical help immediately. Children with meningitis or septicaemia/sepsis will usually get ill quickly and get worse fast, so check them often, including during the night.

About MRF

Meningitis Research Foundation is a leading UK and international charity that brings together people and expertise to defeat meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis wherever it exists.

We want a world free from meningitis and septicaemia/sepsis. We work tirelessly to prevent people from getting meningitis, to see that those who do get it receive the effective diagnosis and treatment they deserve, and to ensure that patients and families have access to the information and support that they need.

Get in touch

You can call, email, text, message, talk to us face-to-face or on social media.

Free helpline 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday

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