

## How serious is the disease?

In most countries, the death rate is about 10-15% of the cases.

## Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. If the treatment is started **early** in the course of the disease, chances of cure are excellent, recovery is quick and without side-effects. The septicemic form carries a more serious outlook. The risk of death is higher among older people.

## Why are relatives and friends sometimes treated?

Often we don't know the **source** of the infection. It is possible that the bacteria that caused the disease may have spread to the sick person from other people in close contact with him/her, even if they don't get the disease. It is also possible that this spread may happen again to someone else. To prevent this, all close contacts are treated with antibiotics. Doctors and Infection Control Nurses have guidelines for deciding who should be treated. Not all types of meningitis require this treatment.

## Now that all children are vaccinated, does this mean we will be safe from meningitis?

No! It has to be remembered that so far, vaccines only protect against the three bacteria : Haemophilus type b (Hib), Meningococcus C and Pneumococcus.

### **The risk from Meningococcus B bacteria still exists.**

Although the risk is lower, it has not gone away. People should still know and learn about the symptoms and early signs of meningitis, so that they can seek medical advice urgently if necessary.



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**MENINGITIS**  
**Gibraltar Health Authority**

## What is meningitis?

**Meningitis is an infection of the fluid and lining that surrounds the brain.**

## What causes meningitis?

Meningitis is usually caused in two different ways.

- **Viral meningitis** is caused by a Virus. It is generally mild and resolves without specific treatment.
- **Bacterial meningitis** is caused by Bacteria. It can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. Bacterial meningitis mostly occurs sporadically in infants and small children, but outbreaks can also occur in Universities, barracks and other crowded places.

## How is bacterial meningitis caused?

There are three common types of bacteria that cause meningitis, called **meningococcus B**, **meningococcus C** and **pneumococcus**.

Before the 1990s, Haemophilus type b (Hib) was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis. In 1992, vaccination against Haemophilus type b (Hib) was introduced in infants as part of their routine immunisations and this form of meningitis has not appeared since in Gibraltar.

In 2001, vaccination against Meningococcus C was introduced in infants and in 2006, vaccination against Pneumococcus was introduced. These forms of meningitis have also not appeared since in Gibraltar.

Currently, the main risk of meningitis comes from Meningococcus B but meningitis itself has become much rarer.

## How common is the disease and the bacteria?

Bacterial meningitis is very rare. In Gibraltar we see about 1 or 2 cases a year.

However, the bacteria which cause the three forms of meningitis are very common and live naturally in the back of the nose and throat. At any one time, around 20 per cent of the population are carrying the germ. That's more than 5,000 persons in Gibraltar.

People of any age can carry these germs for days, weeks or months without becoming ill. In fact, being a carrier helps boost natural immunity to the disease. Only rarely do the bacteria overcome the body's defences and cause meningitis.

## Is meningitis contagious? How is the disease spread?

Yes. The bacteria are spread between people by coughing, kissing and sneezing. They cannot live outside the body for long, so they cannot be picked up from water supplies, swimming pools, buildings or factories. They also cannot be picked up by just breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

## What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

The disease takes two distinct forms :

- **Meningitic form:** In this case, the child or adult has high fever, headache, stiff neck and irritability to bright light. A baby may not be able to articulate these symptoms but might get sick quite rapidly. New-borns and small infants may appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly.



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- **Septicemic form:** In about 20% of the cases, a severe form of meningococcal infection occurs with a red rash that does not blanch on pressing with a finger (or when seen through a glass pressed on the skin) and the person or child will become ill very quickly. Other symptoms of the meningitic form may not be present.

## What should be done?

**Meningitis is a Medical Emergency. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important.**

If the above symptoms occur or if in doubt where a child is concerned, the patient or parent should seek a doctor's advice immediately.