

# Meningitis in teenagers and young people

Meningitis  
now

**After babies and children under five, teenagers and young people are the second most at risk group for contracting meningitis and septicaemia. First year university students are at particular risk.**

Meningitis can be difficult to spot, particularly in the early stages, but it can strike quickly and kill within hours.

Make sure you know the **signs and symptoms** and seek urgent medical help if you are concerned.

## Who is at risk?

Everyone is at risk; however, teenagers - particularly first year university students - and young people are the second most at-risk group.

The most common causes of meningitis are bacteria and viruses.

**Viral meningitis** is very rarely life-threatening, but can still make people very unwell. Most teenagers and young people will make a good recovery, but recovery can be slow.

**Bacterial meningitis** can be fatal and needs rapid admission to hospital and urgent medical treatment. Whilst most teenagers and young people will make a good recovery, around 10% will die and some will be left with lifelong disabilities.

Find out more about the **after-effects** of meningitis and septicaemia.

Some bacteria that cause meningitis can also cause septicaemia (blood poisoning). The rash associated with meningitis is actually caused by septicaemia. You should never wait for a rash, it can be a late sign or may not appear at all. Learn more about the rash and **glass test**.

## Why are teenagers and young people at risk?

- Meningococcal bacteria are the most common cause of bacterial meningitis in the UK. One in four 15-19 year olds carry the bacteria in the back of their throats, compared to one in ten of the UK population, which puts them at greater risk
- The five main groups of meningococcal bacteria that commonly cause disease are groups A, B, C, W and Y
- You can carry the bacteria without becoming unwell (in most cases it will boost your natural immunity)
- Meningococcal bacteria are passed from person to person by coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing. Increased social interaction in this age group means the bacteria can be passed on more easily
- Meningococcal group W (MenW) has historically been rare in the UK, but in 2009, cases began to increase. A particularly aggressive strain of MenW was causing disease in all age groups but there was a significant increase in university students. The MenACWY vaccine was introduced across the UK in August 2015 in response to the rise in MenW cases



Meningitis Helpline  
0808 80 10 388 (UK)  
[www.MeningitisNow.org](http://www.MeningitisNow.org)



## Why are first year university students at risk?

- Students can be more vulnerable to meningitis because of living in more 'cramped' housing or halls of residence. In many cases, young people come together from all over the world to live, study and socialise together. They will be exposed to bacteria and viruses their bodies have not met before. This is why so many new students get 'freshers' flu'
- As early symptoms of meningitis can be similar to common illnesses such as flu or even a hangover, it's easy to mistake meningitis for something else
- When students go off to university, it is often the first time they are living away from their parents and, more often than not, their own health and wellbeing is not a priority. With no parents to keep an eye on them, meningitis can be missed

## Preventing meningitis

Vaccines are the only way to prevent serious diseases like meningitis.

There are several vaccines to prevent meningitis routinely offered to babies, young children and teenagers as part of the UK immunisation schedule, however, there isn't a vaccine to prevent all types.

See more information on our [vaccines page](#).

Going off to university

- Make sure you are up to date with your vaccinations
- Register with a GP surgery or health centre when you get to uni and know how to contact them
- Look out for each other. Let someone know if you are feeling unwell so they can check on you

## Know the signs and symptoms

Without vaccines for all types of meningitis, remaining vigilant is vital; we have [free lifesaving resources](#).

Help yourself and your friends - [download our free symptoms app](#) or call our Helpline on 0808 80 10 388 to request a signs and symptoms card.

## Concerned about meningitis?

If you think someone has meningitis or septicaemia, get medical help immediately.

- Trust your instincts
- Describe the symptoms and say you think it could be meningitis or septicaemia
- If you have had medical advice and are still worried, get medical help again

### Contact our helpline

Call our helpline 0808 80 10 388  
or email [helpline@meningitisnow.org](mailto:helpline@meningitisnow.org)



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