



What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a serious and potentially life-threatening illness. It is caused by infection and inflammation of the protective layers around the brain and spinal cord, producing symptoms like fever, headache, and stiff neck. There are many different causes of meningitis, but viral and bacterial meningitis are the most commonly seen.

Viral meningitis is more common but rarely fatal. **Bacterial meningitis** is less common, but can cause septicaemia (blood poisoning), which can result in death. It is most common from September to April but can occur any time. Ireland has among the highest rates of meningitis in Europe.

What are the signs and symptoms?

People with meningitis can get very sick very quickly, and symptoms can happen suddenly. You should contact your doctor immediately if you are concerned about your symptoms.



High temperature
(Fever)



Stiff neck,
pain or inability to
bring chin to
your chest



Headache



Sensitivity to or
dislike of bright
lights



Vomiting, being
sick or having
stomach pain



Drowsiness or
confusion



Having cold hands
or feet, or shivering



A purplish or red
pin prick rash that
does not fade
under pressure.
**DO NOT WAIT FOR
A RASH**

How do I get meningitis?

Close, prolonged contact is needed to spread from one person to another, by coughing, kissing or sneezing. It can be spread by someone who is sick with meningitis but this is less common. It is not spread by casual contact, such as shaking hands or by breathing the air where a person with meningococcal disease has been. Lots of people carry the bacteria that cause meningitis without ever becoming sick themselves. As many as **25% of 15-19 year olds** are thought to be carriers. This means the bacteria is not causing your body harm, but it can be spread to other people.

How common is meningitis?

Anyone can get meningitis. Babies and children aged under five are the most at-risk. However, there can be a peak in infections among those in their late-teens and young adults, especially between September and April.

It is estimated **1-in-10 cases of bacterial meningitis will die**. Up to 1-in-2 who survive will be left with one or more permanent problems.

How do I know the difference between meningitis and other illnesses or a hangover?

The early signs and symptoms of meningitis are very similar to other infections. **DO NOT WAIT FOR A RASH.** If you are concerned, seek medical help immediately. If a friend is unwell with any of the symptoms, check on them. It could prevent serious illness or death.

Is there a treatment for meningitis?

If caught early, it can be treated with antibiotics in hospital, and is usually the first resort when meningitis is suspected. This is why acting fast is important. If you are a close household or 'kissing' contact of a confirmed bacterial meningitis case, you will be offered vaccination. Close contacts of someone with viral meningitis will not need antibiotics or vaccination.

Is it ok to share drinks, or cigarettes with friends? Is the shared saliva a risk? If alcohol is in sanitiser, does it kill the bacteria?

It is not a good idea to share drinks or cigarettes with others as infection can be passed through saliva. Try not to share anything that has come directly from someone else's mouth. Alcoholic drinks do not contain enough alcohol volume to prevent the spread of bacteria.

Who do I contact if I have symptoms?

- Contact student health services on 061-202534. This centre is open 9am-4.30pm, Monday to Friday.
- **Limerick Doc** out-of-hours can be contacted at 087-7551570. Available weekdays after 5pm and 24 hours at weekends and bank holidays. **Shannondoc** out-of-hours at 0818-123500. Available 6pm-9am, Monday to Friday, and 24 hours at weekends and bank holidays.
- There are several private health centres and walk-in medical centres available 365 days a year to the general public.
- If very concerned, call an ambulance by dialling 112 or 999
- Attend the emergency department at University Hospital Limerick if in need of urgent medical treatment. The address is **University Hospital Limerick, Dooradoyle, Limerick, V94F858**

Is there a vaccine?

Yes, vaccination is available against some of the commonest types of bacteria which cause meningitis.

Group C: In October 2000, the MenC vaccine was introduced in Ireland. It is part of the Primary Childhood Immunisation Programme, given at 6 months of age. Children receive a booster at 13 months and in secondary school. The secondary school MenC booster was replaced with the Men ACWY booster in 2019 which protects against four strains of bacterial meningitis: Meningococcus A, C, W and Y.

Group B: Meningococcal group B is responsible for between 50-80% of meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia cases in Ireland each year. It is now part of the infant immunisation schedule for babies born on or after 1st October 2016. For people born before this, the vaccine can be obtained privately through your GP. However, the most important action required by you is to **know the signs and symptoms.**

It is possible you received your MenC booster in the first year of secondary school. This protects you against meningitis caused by the Meningococcus C group. Meningitis B would not have been given to anyone in school as a routine vaccination.

Vaccination does not protect you 100% against all forms of meningitis, so if you have symptoms, you need to get medical advice urgently. **For more information, visit www.hse.ie.**