Meningococcal disease is a life-threatening infection. It is a term used to describe two major illnesses – meningitis (inflammation of the membranes that surround the brain) and septicaemia (blood poisoning). These can occur on their own or more commonly both together. Most people will make a good recovery but at worst meningococcal disease causes very severe illness that can rapidly result in death.

There are five main groups of meningococcal bacteria that commonly cause disease; A, B, C, W135 and Y.

**Men C vaccine**

A vaccine to prevent meningococcal group C disease (Men C) has been part of the childhood immunisation schedule for the past 14 years. In this time as many as 14,000 cases have been prevented and 1,400 lives saved.

**Who gets this vaccine and when?**

**Babies and children under 5**

Babies and under 5s are the most at risk from Men C disease. Men C vaccine is currently given to babies at 3 and 12 – 13 months of age.

**Teenagers**

Recent research has shown that the protection the vaccine provides starts to decline in teenage years. Teenagers and young people are a high risk group for meningitis and are also more likely to carry meningitis causing bacteria in the back of their throats. From June 2013, the UK immunisation schedule has included a teenage booster of Men C vaccine, offered to all **teenagers between 13 and 15**. It’s given at the same time as the 3-in-1 teenage booster (which protects against tetanus, diphtheria and polio).

**University students**

From late summer 2014, students who are starting university for the first time will be offered a catch-up booster of Men C vaccine. This student catch-up programme will continue for several years until all university entrants have received a Men C teenage booster vaccination. This includes:

- any student entering university who was born after September 1995 and has only received Men C vaccine under the age of 10.
- any student of any age entering or being at university who is unvaccinated against Men C disease.

Men C vaccine is also available for anyone under 25 who has not already received it. Consult your GP to check that your vaccinations are up-to-date. Vaccines available do not cover all types of meningitis; make sure you know the signs and symptoms to look out for.
Meningococcal group C (Men C)

Risk factors
Meningococcal disease can affect any age group. Both adults and children can carry meningococcal bacteria harmlessly in the back of the throat. Around 10% of the general population will be carriers at any given time. Bacteria are passed from person to person by coughing, sneezing and intimate kissing.

Babies and young children are most at risk because their body’s defences are not fully developed.

Teenagers and young people are at risk because of increased social interaction; the number carrying the bacteria rises to 30%.

University students, particularly freshers can be more vulnerable due to living in more cramped housing or halls of residence. In many cases young people come together from all over the country - and indeed world - to live in one place and can be exposed to bacteria and viruses their bodies have not met before. This is why so many new students get ‘fresher’s flu’. 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 for them. With no parents to keep an eye on their health, meningitis can get missed. It is vital that someone always knows if you are feeling unwell and can check up on you.

Over 55s are also an at-risk group as the ability to fight infection begins to decrease.

Trust your instincts
• If you think someone has meningitis or septicaemia get medical help immediately.
• You know your child, a loved one, or your own body, best. Describe the symptoms and say you think it could be meningitis or septicaemia.
• Early diagnosis can be difficult. If you have had advice and are still worried, get medical help again.
• If you are worried about the symptoms of meningitis and spotting them in time, let us help you with our free symptoms card. We also have a symptoms app for you to download - www.meningitisapp.co.uk