

Meningitis and septicaemia symptoms¹

Meningitis should be treated as a medical emergency because bacterial meningitis can lead to septicaemia (blood poisoning), which can be fatal.

Bacterial meningitis

Bacterial meningitis is the more serious form of the condition. The symptoms usually begin suddenly and rapidly get worse. There are some early warning signs that you may notice before the other symptoms appear. If you suspect a case of bacterial meningitis you should phone 999 immediately to request an ambulance.

Early warning signs

The following bacterial meningitis early warning signs can occur earlier than the other symptoms:

- pain in the muscles, joints or limbs, such as in the legs or hands
- unusually cold hands and feet, or shivering
- pale or blotchy skin and blue lips

Trust your instincts. The presence of a high temperature (fever) plus any of the above symptoms should be taken very seriously. If your GP is unavailable you should go straight to the hospital or call an ambulance.

Early symptoms

Early symptoms of bacterial meningitis are similar to those of many other conditions, and include:

- a severe headache
- high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4F) or over
- nausea (feeling sick)
- vomiting (being sick)
- feeling generally unwell

As the condition gets worse, later symptoms may cause:

- drowsiness
- confusion
- seizures or fits
- being unable to tolerate bright lights (photophobia)
- a stiff neck
- a rapid breathing rate
- a blotchy red rash that does not fade or change colour when you place a glass against it – the rash is not always present

Babies and young children

The symptoms of bacterial meningitis are different in babies and young children. Possible symptoms include:

- becoming floppy and unresponsive, or stiff with jerky movements
- becoming irritable and not wanting to be held
- unusual crying
- vomiting and refusing feeds
- pale and blotchy skin
- loss of appetite
- staring expression
- very sleepy with a reluctance to wake up

Less common symptoms include:

- being unable to tolerate bright lights (photophobia)
- a stiff neck

Some babies will develop a swelling in the soft part of their head (fontanelle).

Viral meningitis

Most people with viral meningitis will have mild flu-like symptoms, such as:

- headaches
- fever
- generally not feeling very well

In more severe cases of viral meningitis symptoms may include:

- neck stiffness
- muscle or joint pain
- nausea (feeling sick)
- vomiting (being sick)
- diarrhoea (passing loose, watery stools)
- photophobia (sensitivity to light)

Unlike bacterial meningitis, viral meningitis does not usually lead to septicaemia (blood poisoning).

The information provided reflects the current NHS Choices recommendations.¹ If you have any health concerns please consult your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for further information.

Reference:

1. NHS Choices, Meningitis Symptoms. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Meningitis/Pages/Symptoms.aspx> Accessed 13 February 2013.
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