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## Meningococcal meningitis

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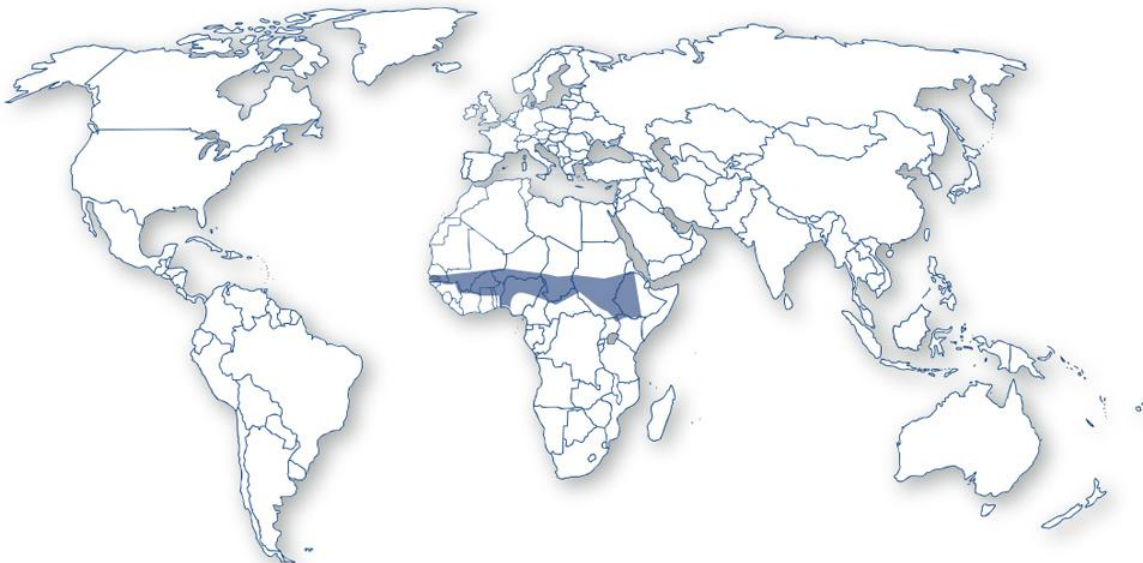
## What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a serious, potentially fatal bacterial infection that causes inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms can appear suddenly and [septicaemia](#) (blood poisoning) can develop rapidly. Suspected meningitis is a medical emergency - treatment should start as soon as possible, so urgent hospital admission is needed. This information sheet covers a particular form of bacterial meningitis called meningococcal meningitis.

## Where is meningitis found?

Meningococcal meningitis is found all over the world including Europe and the UK. However, the highest risk is in Africa, especially in countries below the Sahara Desert. This region - stretching from Senegal in west Africa to Ethiopia in east Africa, is called the "Meningitis Belt".

Meningococcal Meningitis Belt in Africa



■ Meningitis belt

Acknowledgment: Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



According to the [World Health Organization](#) 14 African countries reported 78,416 cases and 4,053 deaths from meningitis in 2009. This is the largest number of cases in Africa in more than a decade.

NaTHNaC's [country information pages](#) and [outbreak surveillance](#) provide regularly updated disease risk information for every country in the world.

### **How can I catch meningitis?**

Meningococcal meningitis bacteria are spread by coughing, sneezing or close contact.

### **What's my risk?**

High risk travellers include healthcare workers and people spending long periods of time in risk areas, especially if living or working with local people. Babies, young children and teenagers aged 15 and 19 years also have a higher risk of disease.

### **Hajj and Umrah pilgrims**

The [Hajj](#) is the yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Makkah) in Saudi Arabia. Umrah is a shorter non-compulsory pilgrimage that can be performed at any time of the year.

Meningococcal meningitis outbreaks have occurred during the Hajj, therefore, the Saudi Arabian government requires that all pilgrims are immunised with a meningococcal meningitis ACW135Y vaccine before travel. This vaccine has to have been given within three years, and not less than ten days, before arrival in Saudi Arabia. Proof of vaccination is an entry requirement for pilgrims and is needed when the pilgrim applies for their visa.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia [symptoms](#) include:

- **Severe headache**
- **Fever**
- **Cold hands and feet**
- **Vomiting**
- **Muscle/joint pain**
- **Sensitivity to bright light**
- **Sleepiness**
- **Confusion**
- **Seizures (fits) and loss of consciousness**

**Babies and young children may also:**

- **Refuse feeds**
- **Cry or moan unusually**
- **Become irritable, listless and unresponsive**



- **Move in a jerky way or become very stiff or floppy**
- **Breathe very rapidly**

Septicaemia can cause a red, purplish rash that does not fade under pressure. For instance if a clear glass tumbler is pressed against the skin, the rash does not fade.

It is important to remember that a rash does not always appear, so if meningitis is suspected, you must get to hospital immediately - **DO NOT** wait for a rash.

### **Is there a vaccine?**

There are effective vaccines to prevent meningococcal meningitis. There are also vaccines to prevent other forms of bacterial meningitis, such as vaccines against Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) and pneumococcal bacteria. These are given as normal childhood immunisations.

If you are going to a high risk area, discuss your travel plans carefully with your nurse or doctor, to see if you should receive a vaccine against A, C, W135 and Y meningitis strains. Avoid crowded situations and practice good hygiene.

### **Can it be treated?**

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with antibiotics, but it is urgent that once the symptoms of meningitis occur, they are recognised, properly diagnosed and treatment is started immediately. There is a risk of permanent disability or death, especially if septicaemia develops.

If you do not have a [spleen](#) or your spleen does not work properly, you are at high risk of serious complications.

**\*Remember - meningitis is a medical emergency.\***

### **Links**

- [Health Protection Agency: Meningococcal disease.](#)
- [Meningitis Research Foundation: Meningitis Prevention.](#)
- [Meningitis Trust: Meningitis signs and symptoms.](#)
- [NaTHNaC: Country Information Pages.](#)
- [World Health Organization: Meningococcal meningitis.](#)