

A B C D Children's Health

Bacterial Meningitis: What Every Parent Should Know

(NAPSA)—A little knowledge can help parents deal with a dangerous thing: Bacterial meningitis. It's a scary disease because it's not only life-threatening, but difficult to recognize, especially in the very young.

Although the condition is relatively rare, children between birth and eight months have a higher risk of contracting bacterial meningitis because of their immature immune systems and increased exposure to infections at this age.

Most meningitis cases occur when bacteria from an infection travels through the bloodstream to the brain and spinal cord.

The best defense, according to the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), is for parents and caretakers to know the signs and what to do.

"Bacterial meningitis can progress extremely rapidly in the first 24 hours," said Dr. Sharon Mace, of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). Common symptoms in children and infants can include any of the following:

- Refusing to drink or eat and vomiting
- High-pitched moaning cry and whimpering
- Dislike of being handled
- Difficulty waking up; increased lethargy
- Fever
- Blank, staring expression
- Knees automatically brought up toward the body when the neck is bent forward or pain in the legs when bent



In children and infants, the signs of bacterial meningitis are not always obvious, since the youngster cannot easily communicate symptoms.

- Inability to straighten lower legs after the hips have already been flexed 90 degrees
- A rash that looks like small clusters of tiny pinpricks at the beginning then turn purple in color and will NOT turn white when pressed. This is an indication of an infection in the blood

If any of these symptoms are present, the infant or child should be taken immediately to the nearest emergency department. Diagnoses may require a lumbar puncture, which involves the removal of spinal fluid. It is important for parents to know this test is essential to diagnosing meningitis and is a safe test for infants and children. When local anesthetic is used as part of the procedure, there is little discomfort.

For more health and safety information, visit ACEP's Web site at www.acep.org.