

Meningitis B and the Recent Outbreak in Kent

What Is Meningitis B?

Meningitis B (MenB) is a serious infection caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis*. It can lead to meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) and sepsis (blood poisoning). Both conditions can become life-threatening very quickly, so early recognition is vital.

The Current Situation in Kent

Kent has recently experienced an unusual and significant outbreak of Meningitis B. Health officials have described the outbreak as unprecedented, but the overall risk to the wider public remains low. Public health teams are actively managing the situation with antibiotics, vaccination, and contact tracing.

How Meningitis B Spreads

MenB bacteria spread through close, prolonged contact, such as:

- Living in the same household
- Kissing
- Sharing drinks, vapes, or utensils

It does **not** spread as easily as illnesses like measles or COVID-19.

Symptoms to Look Out For

Meningitis can develop suddenly, sometimes within hours. Seek urgent medical help if you notice:

- A rash that does not fade when pressed with a glass
- High fever
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Joint or muscle pain
- Sensitivity to light
- Cold hands and feet
- Confusion, drowsiness, or difficulty waking
- Seizures

If someone becomes unwell quickly, do not wait. **Call 999 or go to A&E.**

What Is Being Done in Kent?

Preventative Antibiotics

Antibiotics are being offered to:

- Anyone who attended Club Chemistry on the dates in March linked to cases
- Close contacts of confirmed or suspected cases

These antibiotics help prevent the bacteria from spreading.

Targeted Vaccination

Vaccination is being offered to:

- Students living in University of Kent halls
- Anyone who has received preventative antibiotics
- Other groups identified as higher risk

Thousands of vaccines have already been given.

Should People Outside Kent Be Worried?

For most people outside the affected groups, the risk remains low. There is currently no evidence that the outbreak has spread widely beyond Kent.

It is still sensible to:

- Know the symptoms
- Ensure routine vaccinations (such as MMR and MenACWY) are up to date
- Seek medical advice promptly if concerned

The MenB Vaccine

The MenB vaccine (Bexsero) is routinely offered to babies in the routine vaccination schedule, but not currently to teenagers and young adults on the NHS. The Kent outbreak has prompted renewed discussion about whether this should change.

For now, vaccination is being targeted to those at highest risk.

Final Thoughts

This outbreak is understandably worrying, especially for parents and students. However:

- Meningitis B remains rare
- Public health teams are responding rapidly
- Early recognition of symptoms is the best protection

If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch. We are here to help.

Dr Maya Chowdhury