

THE ISLAMIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA IS ISSUING THIS ADVISORY IN VIEW OF THE RECENT REPORT OF A SEVERE CASE OF MENINGITIS REPORTED IN A LEARNER AFTER ATTENDING A CELEBRATORY FUNCTION AT A SCHOOL IN KZN

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is a condition that can cause fever, headache, and a stiff neck. It happens when the tissues surrounding the brain and spinal cord (called the "meninges") get infected. This can happen after a child has an infection in another part of the body. The germs can travel through the blood to the meninges.

There are 2 main types of meningitis, depending on which germs are causing the infection:

- "Bacterial meningitis" is caused by bacteria
- "Viral meningitis" is caused by viruses

It is important that doctors figure out which type a child has. This is because bacterial meningitis is a medical emergency. If it is not treated quickly, it can lead to brain problems, like deafness or learning problems, or even death. Viral meningitis is usually less serious. It does not usually lead to long-term brain problems or death.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

The 2 types can cause many of the same symptoms. These can include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Stiff neck
- Nausea or vomiting
- Acting confused, or being hard to wake up
- Being bothered by light in the eyes
- Small red-purple spots on the skin that don't go away when you press on them

Newborn babies can also have other symptoms that include:

- A bulging soft spot on the skull
- Acting more fussy or irritable than usual
- Being more sleepy than usual
- Not feeding well

When should I bring my child to the doctor?

If you think that your child might have meningitis, bring them to the doctor or hospital right away.

Bring your child to the emergency department right away if they:

- Have a fever, headache, and stiff neck
- Seem very sleepy or confused or do not seem to respond to you
- Have a seizure

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- Have small red-purple spots on the skin that don't go away when you press on them
- If your child has any other symptoms that concern you, or if you have any questions, call their doctor or nurse. They can tell you what to do next.

Is there a test for meningitis?

Yes. Doctors can do different tests to figure out if a child has meningitis and what type it is. Tests can include:

- Blood tests
- "Lumbar puncture," also known as a spinal tap – To do this, a doctor puts a thin needle in the lower back and removes a small amount of spinal fluid. Spinal fluid is the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. They will do lab tests on the spinal fluid.
- CT scan or other imaging tests – Imaging tests create pictures of the inside of the body.

How is meningitis treated?

Treatment depends on the type of meningitis:

- **Bacterial** meningitis is treated in the hospital with antibiotics. These are given through an "IV" (a thin tube that goes into a vein).
- **Viral** meningitis is not treated with antibiotics. That's because antibiotics do not kill viruses. Treatment for viral meningitis includes:
 - Rest
 - Drinking fluids
 - Medicine to help relieve fever and headache
 - Antiviral medication for certain types of viral meningitis

It can take a few days for tests to show whether a child has bacterial or viral meningitis. But bacterial meningitis needs to be treated quickly, so doctors usually start antibiotics right away. Then, doctors wait for the test results to know if they should keep giving the antibiotics or stop them.

Can meningitis spread from 1 person to another?

Yes. The bacteria and viruses that cause meningitis can spread from 1 person to another. Most bacteria that cause meningitis such as meningococcus, pneumococcus and *Haemophilus influenzae* are carried in the human nose and throat. They spread from person to person by respiratory droplets or throat secretions

Can meningitis be prevented?

To help lower the chance of getting meningitis, you can:

- Make sure that your child gets the vaccines your doctor or nurse recommends – Certain vaccines can lower the chance of your child getting meningitis.

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Licensed vaccines against meningococcal, pneumococcal and *Haemophilus influenzae* disease have been available for many years.

Antibiotics for close contacts of those with meningococcal disease, when given promptly, decreases the risk of transmission

If someone in your home has meningitis, you can:

- Avoid spreading germs – For example, wash your hands before eating, and do not share cups or silverware.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about taking antibiotics – For some types of bacterial meningitis, doctors prescribe antibiotics for other people at home to take. This is to help prevent them from getting meningitis, too.

Meningitis is a medical emergency.

Meningitis is potentially fatal within 24 hours and requires urgent medical attention. It usually cannot be safely cared for at home.

ISSUED BY THE ISLAMIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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