

## Focus on Prevention

- Vaccines are the only way to prevent meningitis. A major aspect of the strategy to reduce the burden of meningitis in the UK is to evaluate and deploy safe and effective vaccines.
- The importance of vaccines over the last 2 decades in reducing the incidence of bacterial meningitis and meningococcal septicaemia cannot be overestimated. Many thousands of cases have been prevented and numerous lives saved.
- There are a number of vaccines that provide protection against the three major types of bacteria that cause meningitis here in the UK - haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib), meningococcus and streptococcus pneumoniae.
- Introduction of the Hib vaccine has virtually eliminated serious infections caused by this bacterium. Whilst introduction of the meningococcal group C vaccine has rapidly reduced the incidence of meningococcal group C infections in immunised age groups (all those under 25 years of age). Both these vaccines are offered as part of the routine childhood immunisation programme.
- Meningococcal vaccines are also offered to those people travelling to areas of the world where vaccine preventable serogroups are found. Polysaccharide vaccines are available against serogroups A, C, W135 and Y.
- Pneumococcal vaccines are currently recommended for those at increased risk of getting pneumococcal disease. This includes babies and young children with underlying chronic illnesses such as chronic heart disease and diabetes. Polysaccharide vaccines are also routinely offered to adults 75 years and over.
- The Department of Health is looking at making pneumococcal vaccination part of the childhood immunisation programme. At present several studies are being carried out to see how the pneumococcal vaccine best fits into the immunisation schedule with all the other vaccines, to ensure the best levels of protection in the most effective way.
- The major challenge now for the UK is the development and introduction of a vaccine that protects against meningococcal group B disease (meningitis and septicaemia). Despite a great deal of research both in the UK and abroad, experts believe that an effective vaccine is still between five and ten years away.
- In the absence of vaccines for all types of bacterial meningitis, it is important that health professionals continue to have an understanding of the signs and symptoms of meningitis so that they can educate those in their care. Knowing the signs and symptoms and taking immediate action to get medical help can save lives

*For more information on immunisations visit [www.immunisation.nhs.uk](http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk) or [www.healthscotland.com/immunisation](http://www.healthscotland.com/immunisation)*