Points to Remember

Meningitis can mimic flu - maintain a high level of suspicion with regard to flu-like illnesses.

Let your mates / a neighbour / flatmate know you are feeling ill.

Get them to keep an eye on you and be prepared to do the same for them.

If you are at all concerned about your illness get in touch with your GP - whatever time it is, day or night. If your situation continues to worsen, get back to your GP giving them this information or call an ambulance. Your action at this point could save your life.

Useful Emergency Numbers

NHS Direct - 0845 4647
Meningitis Research Foundation 24 Hour Helpline - 080 8800 3344
Meningitis Trust - 0845 6000 800
University Health Centre – 01904 433290

For additional advice or information please contact the Health and Safety Department on 01904 432020.
HANGOVER, FLU OR MENINGITIS?

One of the reasons why meningococcal disease can be so deadly is that, in the early stages, the symptoms are just like flu symptoms. Headaches, fever, aches and pains, shivering, nausea, it does the lot.

Meningococcal disease is, understandably, a frightening disease.

Though rare, it is usually associated with a great deal of anxiety. This leaflet contains information about the disease, and advice and guidance on what to do if you or your friends are taken ill.

WHAT IS MENINGITIS?

The brain is surrounded by layers of soft tissue called the meninges. Meningitis is an inflammation of these soft layers, usually as the result of an infection. It may be caused by a number of different viruses and bacteria but the most common cause of meningitis in young adults is a bacterium called ‘meningococcus’.

Meningococcus first invades the throat, then spreads to the blood stream, causing a widespread infection of the whole body called ‘septicaemia’, then it may settle in the layers around the brain, causing ‘meningitis’. There are several different strains of meningococcus; the most common of which are Groups B and C.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF MENINGOCOCCAL INFECTION?

The most common symptoms of meningitis are:

- Headache
- Fever
- Vomiting
- Discomfort caused by bright lights
- Very stiff neck - inability to put chin to chest
- Confusion, drowsiness or unconsciousness.

When the infection causes septicaemia the most prominent symptoms may be:

- Joint or muscle pains
- Cold hands and feet
- A rash like pinpricks which does not fade when pressed with a glass (although not in all cases).

Do not wait for this rash to appear before taking action. Not all these symptoms need to be present, and they may not develop at the same time.

It is often difficult to tell the symptoms of meningitis from those of flu. This is part of the reason this illness can be a killer. Most of the symptoms described for meningitis may also be present if you have flu. If you do start to feel very unwell with any of these symptoms do not hesitate to seek medical advice from your GP. Your doctor will be in the best position to find out why you are feeling so ill.
HOW DO YOU CATCH MENINGITIS?

Meningitis is passed from one person to another by large droplets from the nose and throat. This usually occurs among very close contacts as a result of sharing drinks or cigarettes, coughing, sneezing or kissing. Such contact should be reported to your Health Centre or GP as a course of antibiotics may be required as a precautionary measure.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF CATCHING MENINGITIS?

Because very close contact is needed to pass on the infection, the contacts that are at most risk of catching the infection from another person are the ‘kissing contacts’. This includes family members, girlfriends and boyfriends. Just being in the same room as another person with meningitis is not usually considered to be very risky, except where this contact has lasted many hours, such as sleeping in the same room overnight. Putting your face close to a friend to catch what they are saying in a noisy disco or bar may also allow the transfer of the bacteria. Workmates and classmates are not usually at increased risk of infection.

HOW COMMON IS MENINGITIS?

In the York area there are, a number of confirmed cases of meningitis every year, so York does not have a big meningitis problem. About half these cases occur in children less than 5 years of age, but young people aged 15-24 years and first year students living in halls of residence in particular, are also at higher risk than the general population. Most, but not all cases, occur during winter months.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PROTECT PEOPLE FROM MENINGITIS?

BE VIGILANT! If you are suffering from flu or a flu-like illness treat it with a high degree of suspicion and if you have the slightest cause for concern contact your GP. It is essential that, having spoken to your GP, you continue to be vigilant for signs of your condition deteriorating. Should this happen, you must call your GP back or if you are a resident at the University notify the Security Control Centre on extension 4444 or 3333 that you require an ambulance.

MAKE SURE YOU ARE VACCINATED! All students should have been offered vaccination against Group C meningitis either at school or by their GP. If you have not been vaccinated and you would like to be protected now, please contact The Health Centre or your own GP as soon as possible. However, it is important to realise that the vaccine only protects against infection with Group C meningococcus, responsible for about one third of cases. Students are still at risk of Group B disease for which there is no vaccine. This means that students must still be vigilant for the signs of meningitis and should NOT delay seeking help because of a mistaken belief that they cannot catch meningitis.

REGISTER WITH A GP! One of your responsibilities as an independent young adult away from home is to take personal responsibility for your health and medical welfare. It is important that you register with a GP as soon as possible after arriving in York. We will help put you in touch with an emergency GP service if required, but the most appropriate treatment of your case will be decided between your GP and yourself.
THE STUDENT NEXT DOOR IS LOOKING ‘A BIT UNDER THE WEATHER’. SHOULD I INTERFERE AND ASK IF THEY ARE OK?

Definitely! Like you, they are away from home, probably for the first time. They may simply have a cold, flu or a hangover, but it could be something more serious. Offer to look in on them from time to time to see if they need anything. Is their condition worsening? Have they developed any of the symptoms listed earlier? Are they conscious and coherent during these visits? If not, press the panic button, it just might save their life. You’d want someone to do the same for you, wouldn’t you?

SYMPTOMS

Not all these symptoms will show at once.

Vomiting
High Temperature
Violent or severe headache
Neck Stiffness
Light Aversion
Drowsiness
Joint Pains
Fitting, Confusion

Symptoms for children may also include:

Fever
possibly with the hands and feet feeling cold
Refusing foods or vomiting
High pitched moaning cry or whimpering
Dislike of being handled, fretful
Neck retraction with arching back
Blank and staring expression
Child difficult to wake lethargic
Pale, blotchy skin colour