

# Deadly meningitis outbreak in UK due to erosion of public health

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A deadly outbreak of meningitis in the county of Kent in England has claimed the lives of two young people, a 21-year-old student at the University of Kent and a sixth-form pupil at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Faversham.

As of March 19, the number of cases had risen to 29 and is expected to grow. Of these, 13 infections have been identified as the more dangerous strain, meningitis B, or MenB. The outbreak is believed to have originated at the Club Chemistry nightclub in Canterbury, visited by students between March 5 and 7.

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and National Health Service (NHS) have declared a national incident.

UKHSA head Susan Hopkins commented, "I can say that in my 35 years working in medicine, in healthcare and hospitals, this is the most cases I've seen in a single weekend with this type of infection. It's the explosive nature that is unprecedented here—the number of cases in such a short space of time."

UKHSA has launched a targeted vaccination programme for about 5,000 students at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Kent halls of residence and begun contact tracing. Crowds of masked students have been queuing outside four emergency clinics to receive emergency doses of preventative antibiotics, with many disappointed due to shortages.

The Starmer Labour government waited two days after being notified of the first cases before alerting the public on March 15. This includes being notified by French health authorities of a case linked to Kent.

Their inaction has compounded the damage done by successive governments in failing to vaccinate those most at risk from the disease. Spread through close contact by respiratory droplets from sneezing, coughing, kissing, or sharing vapes, students crowded in college dormitories or lecture theatres are particularly vulnerable, as are schoolchildren.

Routine MenB vaccination for babies and young children only began in 2015, so the affected students missed out.

There was no national catch-up programme, and the government is resisting calls by the Independent Pharmacies Association to begin one now. The Meningitis Now charity is calling for the MenB vaccine to be offered to all young people, beginning with the most vulnerable, and for a booster programme to be rolled out for teenagers from 2030.

Chemists are selling the MenB vaccine privately for between £100 and £120 per dose, and £200-£240 for a two-dose course. Even at this price, pharmacies have reported shortages.

The government is also resisting temporarily closing schools in the Kent area, and the universities remain open, though exams are being conducted online. This echoes the stance of all parties in parliament at the outset of the COVID pandemic. Given the two-week incubation period for the disease to emerge, a limited lockdown would help stem the spread, alongside contact tracing, vaccination and antibiotic treatment.

Invasive meningococcal disease, or meningitis, is a life-threatening illness caused by bacteria or viruses that can develop rapidly and require immediate antibiotic treatment. The viral strain is less deadly. According to Professor Paul Hunter at the Norwich School of Medicine, "You can go from being mildly ill walking around to being dead in less than a day."

Around one in 10 infected people die, according to the Meningitis Research Foundation. The illness leaves one in every two or three survivors with permanent complications such as hearing loss, epilepsy or cognitive impairment. Others may suffer amputations following sepsis.

Symptoms that should be regarded as an early warning not to be ignored include a stiff neck, aversion to bright lights, a rash that does not disappear when a glass is pressed against the skin, pain in the joints and muscles, seizures, diarrhoea and vomiting, extreme sleepiness and delirium. Health officials are alerting students to seek medical help immediately rather than attempting to sleep it off. Other symptoms may include cold hands and feet, headache, fever and rapid breathing.

MenB is now the most common form of the illness, which accounted for four out of every five meningitis cases in the UK last year. The culprit is a bacterium known as meningococcus or *Neisseria meningitidis*, which lives in 10 percent of people's throats at any one time. It is only a problem if it invades the blood or spinal fluid, leading to infection of the protective lining of the spinal cord.

Last year, there were 378 cases of meningitis in England, of which 83 percent were found to be MenB. Professor of public health at the University of Sheffield, Andrew Lee, commented in the *Guardian*: "We used to get a lot more cases of meningitis and deaths from it, primarily the A and C strains."

In 1999-2000, there were 2,595 cases and 150-200 deaths in England due to meningococcal disease. The vaccination programme introduced to protect the public against the A and C strains reduced the number of fatalities to 31 in 2024-25, a 75 percent reduction.

In the UK, a MenB vaccine was rolled out in 2015 for babies at eight weeks, a further dose at 12 weeks and a booster at age one. Children born before 2015 were not offered the MenB vaccine. This is because the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation (JCVI), the independent government body that advises the National Health Service (NHS) on which vaccines to provide, had not recommended it for them.

JCVI decided it was not "cost-effective" to treat teenagers with the MenB jab. It maintained this position despite a petition calling for wider access signed by 823,345 people in early 2016, making it the largest health petition on record.

The petition reflected public concern following the tragic death from meningitis of toddler Faye Burdett in February 2016. But the signatories' call to expand vaccination to all children up to age 11 went unheeded while discussion in parliamentary working groups focused on the "cost-effectiveness of the vaccines".

On March 17, Health Secretary Wes Streeting sought to deflect calls for a wider rollout of the vaccine to young people, telling parliament, "We obviously follow the expert independent advice of the JCVI... I will be asking them to re-examine eligibility for meningitis vaccines. I will do so without prejudicing their decision because we have to follow the clinical advice on this."

Vaccination programmes against other strains of meningitis have proved highly effective, such as the 6-in-1 and pneumococcal childhood vaccines. Teenagers in Years 9 and 10 (13 and 14-year-olds) and young adults up to 25 years are also offered the MenACWY vaccine, which protects against four other meningococcal groups but not MenB.

Precious time is being lost to halt the spread of the

outbreak. The response of the government to this latest public health crisis is dictated by its overarching agenda of austerity, as it funnels billions to the British and NATO war machine. Streeting has already declared that "The NHS is going to have to get used to the fact that money is tight."

Labour has slashed NHS provision of flu and COVID vaccines. COVID boosters last year were confined to those aged 75+ or immunosuppressed, and flu jabs to those 65+ or with an eligible health condition. This contributed to a record surge in flu cases this winter in England, 10 times higher than in 2023.

Given the speed and severity of the latest meningitis outbreak, health officials have considered the possibility of a mutant strain of MenB emerging, with a sample currently under laboratory examination. This could mean that the effectiveness of the current vaccine needs to be reassessed, and that the MenB vaccine may need to be modified.

The family of Juliette Kenny, the 21-year-old from the University of Kent who died from the infection last week, has called for greater protection for young people from meningitis. Michael Kenny paid tribute to his daughter as "a force in this world" who "spread fun, love and happiness", saying the illness that took his daughter "so quickly" could be avoided. "No family should experience this pain and tragedy. This can be avoided... The work to protect young people has started. It needs to be more."

Vinny Smith, Chief Executive of the Meningitis Research Foundation told BBC Breakfast on Friday that he was joining the Kenny family in calling for a "nationally, freely available vaccine" to reduce the risk MenB poses to teenagers and young adults. Kenny said this necessary measure had been blocked for years, "it falls at the cost-effectiveness hurdle".



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