

New research has shown that the burden of meningitis in babies unchanged in 25 years

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New research by Professor Paul Heath funded by Meningitis Research Foundation has shown that the burden of meningitis in babies under three months of age has changed little in the past 25 years.

Babies under three months of age are 70 times more at risk of developing [bacterial meningitis](#) than adults and about one in 10 of these

babies will not survive.

This latest study, funded by Meningitis Research Foundation and carried out at St George's, evaluated the burden of bacterial meningitis in babies and compared it with figures from previous studies in the 1990s and 1980s.

Between July 2010 and July 2011, the research team identified 364 cases of bacterial meningitis in infants aged under three months in the UK and Ireland

In nearly 300 of these babies, scientists were able to isolate and identify bacteria, and found that in half of cases, Group B Streptococcus (GBS) was the cause. This is relatively unchanged since 1997, despite a national GBS prevention policy introduced in 2003 which guides the use of antibiotics in labour for women whose babies are at higher risk of GBS in the first week of life.

Professor Paul Heath said: "GBS prevention using antibiotics, can only have an impact on early onset disease which are babies aged under seven days, meaning there are still late-onset cases contributing significantly to the burden of meningitis and septicaemia in neonates.

"Clearly a better strategy for preventing GBS infection is now required."

The good news is that, there are vaccines against GBS in development, including one in clinical trials in pregnant women.

Christopher Head, Chief Executive of Meningitis Research Foundation said: "July is GBS awareness month and this latest research has shown that meningitis is still a very real threat to our children despite them being protected later in life from a number of strains.

"We are now committed to funding a follow on project to this study, looking at the longer term outcomes of bacterial [meningitis](#) in [babies](#) and how this can be used in cost-effectiveness calculations of future GBS vaccines."

The cases in the study were identified either through the British Paediatric Surveillance Unit, Public Health England, Health Protection Scotland and the Irish Meningococcal, and Meningitis Reference Laboratory or through charities including Meningitis Research Foundation's national helpline.

The results have recently been published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*.

Provided by St. George's University of London

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