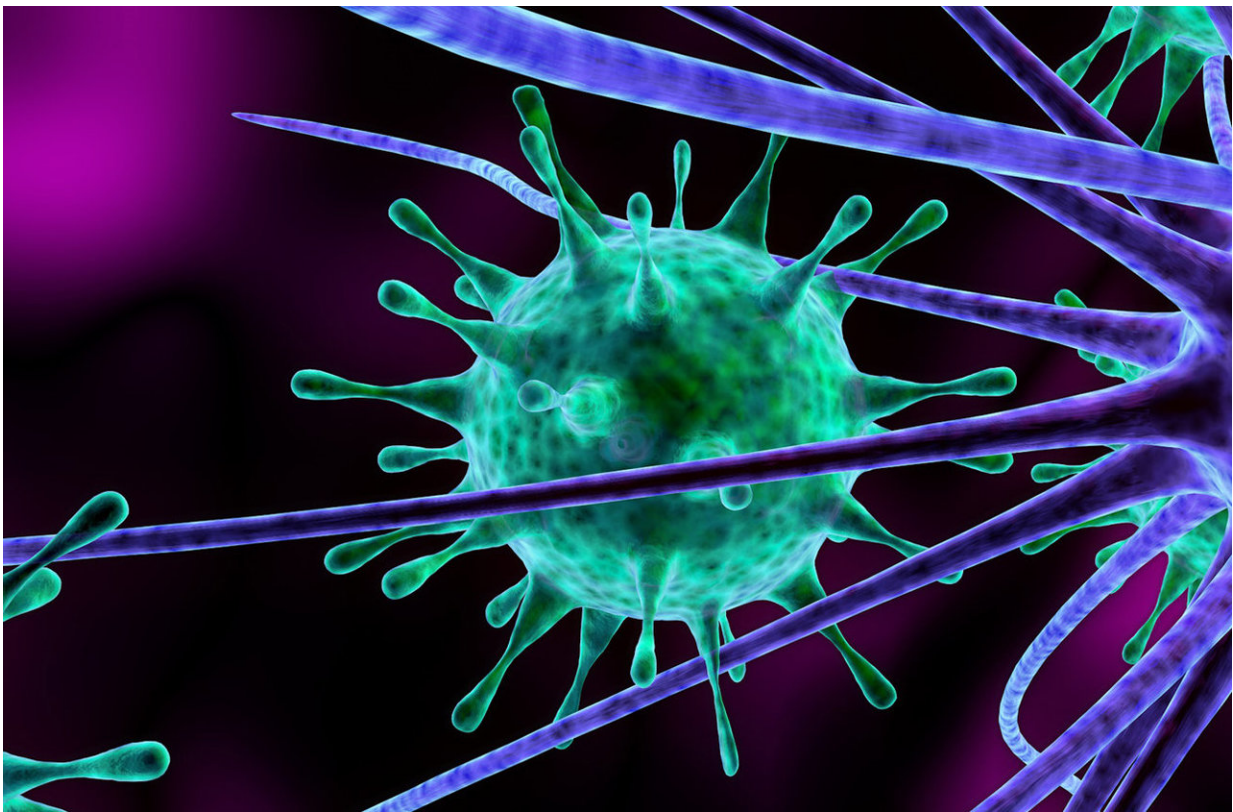


Study finds only half of infants with deadly meningitis show traditional signs of the disease

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Credit: St. George's University of London

Researchers at St George's, University of London, say their new study shows the classic symptoms associated with bacterial meningitis are

uncommon in young infants less than three months of age – the group at highest risk of the disease.

Only around half of babies under three months of age who have [bacterial meningitis](#) display [fever](#), which has for decades been the trigger for further medical investigations.

Professor Paul Heath, one of the study investigators at St George's, University of London, said: "The classic features of meningitis were uncommon in many cases. The symptoms displayed by young infants when they are seen by doctors at first in hospital are often non-specific and only half of cases showed signs of a fever.

"Guidelines focusing on serious infections—including meningitis—in children have been introduced in the UK and the USA but all specify fever as a key feature of infection.

"Unfortunately, neither the rates of bacterial meningitis in babies, nor the numbers of deaths, has changed since the 1980s.

"Clinicians must, therefore, still consider bacterial meningitis in the diagnosis of an unwell infant that doesn't present with fever."

The study, titled "Clinical Characteristics and Risk Factors for Poor Outcome in Infants Less Than 90 Days of Age with Bacterial Meningitis in the United Kingdom and Ireland," is published in the *Paediatric Infectious Diseases* journal.

The study led by experts at St George's University of London, funded by charity Meningitis Research Foundation (MRF), involved 263 infants across the UK and Ireland and found that fever (temperature above 38°C) was reported in only 54 percent of cases, seizures in 28 percent, bulging fontanelle in 22 percent, coma in 6 percent and neck stiffness in

only 3 percent.

In the UK, babies under three months of age are 70 times more likely to get bacterial meningitis than adults. Newborn babies are at the highest risk of all.

The study found that infants who did present with fever tended to be older than infants without fever. The median age for this symptom was around 21 days old. Of note, 52 percent of the infants without fever had other features suggestive of bacterial meningitis, such as apnea (33 percent), seizures (32 percent), bulging fontanelle (16 percent), coma (7 percent) and neck stiffness (3 percent).

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