

Jeff Beck dies of bacterial meningitis. What you need to know about the disease

January 13 2023, by Rebecca A. Drummond



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Influential English guitarist Jeff Beck, who rose to fame playing with the Yardbirds and later fronted the Jeff Beck Group, died on January 10 aged 78 after [contracting bacterial meningitis](#).

Bacterial meningitis happens when germs get into the tissues (the meninges) surrounding the brain and spinal cord. The infection around the brain can cause swelling and inflammation that interrupts how the brain functions.

Many types of germ cause meningitis. The most dangerous of these are bacteria, which can be picked up from food that is not cooked properly or can be spread by infected people with a [sneeze or a cough](#).

While the bacteria that cause meningitis are found in many people, most will not get ill. Why some people suddenly become sick with meningitis and others do not is not completely understood, but may be linked to certain events such as a head injury, or by another infection, or drugs that [weaken the immune system](#).

People who contract meningitis can become ill very suddenly, in just a few hours in some cases. It is important to recognize the signs of this disease because fast action can save someone's life.

The most common early symptoms include headache, fever with cold hands and feet, a stiff neck and a dislike of bright lights. Some patients may also develop a rash that does not disappear when a glass is pushed against it. In babies and [young children](#), additional symptoms may include a strange-sounding cry and a sore soft spot on the head.

Beck's death is a reminder that anyone can become ill from meningitis. While some groups of people are at greater risk of getting the disease, the germs that cause the illness can infect anyone. Young babies are at a higher risk for meningitis, but the risk also increases for [older adults](#).

Bacterial meningitis should be treated urgently with antibiotics. This is why it is important to get seen quickly by a doctor if you suspect meningitis, because the quicker the treatment can be started, the more

likely it will be able to stop the infection.

Effective vaccines

We can also protect ourselves against meningitis with vaccines. For some of the bacteria that cause meningitis, there are vaccines available that can reduce the risk of the infection. These include the MenB, MMR and [pneumococcal vaccines](#), which are all recommended for babies in the UK because they each protect against different types of bacteria that cause meningitis infections in young children in particular.

Vaccines are particularly important for fighting meningitis because the bacteria that cause meningitis can [become resistant to antibiotic treatment](#). This means that those drugs can fail. With the number of antibiotic-resistant bacteria currently rising, this could make delivering life-saving treatment to meningitis patients difficult in the future.

Other types of germs that can cause meningitis include viruses and fungi. Viral meningitis rarely causes death, however, and is a lot less serious than bacterial meningitis. Fungal meningitis causes similar symptoms to bacterial meningitis but is much rarer in the UK.

Fungal meningitis most commonly affects people with immune systems weakened by cancer or another type of infection. Unlike [bacterial meningitis](#), there are no vaccines to prevent it and fewer drugs available for treatment.

For all types of meningitis, the infection can cause [brain damage](#) and swelling that contribute towards death or disabling injuries in survivors, [such as hearing loss](#).

Ongoing research by my laboratory and others is trying to understand how the germs that cause meningitis invade the brain and cause

inflammation. This is to help us develop new treatments to fight these infections, and to discover [risk factors](#) so we can identify people who are more likely to get meningitis.

The best way to protect yourself and loved ones from meningitis is to learn the signs and symptoms of the disease and get help quickly. In the meantime, life-saving research and the development of new vaccines will help to reduce the number of deaths caused by this devastating disease.

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