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Background information on invasive meningococcal disease

What is invasive meningococcal disease?
The terms used to describe invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) have changed through time but this is a disease caused by meningococcal bacteria. It most commonly causes meningitis (inflammation of the lining that surrounds the brain and spinal cord) or septicaemia (blood poisoning) but can also, more rarely, affect other parts of the body. There are different groups of meningococcal bacteria and currently the most common in the UK is Men B, followed by Men W, Y and C.

A longer term perspective
The UK and Republic of Ireland, together with Iceland, have the highest rates of IMD in Europe. The levels of IMD are not stable and we experience periods of higher and lower activity which may last for 10-30 years at a time (see Graph One). We are currently in a period of lower meningococcal activity.

Graph One: Notifications of meningococcal disease between 1912 and 2014, England and Wales

Recent meningococcal activity
In the last 15 years there has been an overall decrease in cases of IMD in England. This was initially due to the reduction of MenC disease after the introduction of MenC vaccination from 1999. MenB IMD fell after a peak in 2001 and this has been accompanied by an increase in Men W and Men Y cases in more recent years (Graph Two).
Graph Two: Laboratory confirmed cases of invasive meningococcal disease, England

MenB disease in children
The highest rates of MenB IMD in England are in infants under one year of age followed by toddlers aged 1 year (Graph three). Cases are notably lower in children aged two years and older. Eight percent of children with MenB disease aged under 5 years died in 2014/15, more than half of these deaths were in infants under one year of age. By May 2017 all children under 2 years of age will have become eligible for MenB vaccination.

Graph Three: Laboratory confirmed MenB cases and ONS deaths, England 2014/15 (provisional)