

Secretary of State update to the House on meningitis outbreak

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The Secretary of State Wes Streeting updated the House on the meningitis outbreak and the latest steps being taken to support those affected.

With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to make a statement on the outbreak of meningococcal disease in Canterbury and East Kent.

My thoughts, and I'm sure the thoughts of the entire House, will be with the families and friends of those two young people who've sadly died. I cannot begin to understand what they must be going through.

This is an unprecedented outbreak. It is also a rapidly developing situation.

With these considerations in mind, Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely paramount that we stick to the facts, which is what I intend to do.

This is the current situation. As of 09:30 this morning, UKHSA has confirmed four cases of group B meningococcal disease with another 11 cases under investigation. The two deaths are associated with this cluster.

The majority of cases link back to the Club Chemistry nightclub over the dates of the 5th, 6th, and 7th of March, and their associated networks. Club Chemistry is currently closed voluntarily.

Going forward, Mr. Speaker, these figures will be updated publicly by UKHSA each day at 09:30.

Let me now turn to the timeline of this outbreak. UKHSA was notified about the first case on Friday 13th March. In line with established protocol, health officials began identifying and tracing the patient's immediate close contacts who were offered prophylactic antibiotics as a matter of urgency.

On Saturday, UKHSA were in touch with the University of Kent to ensure they had the necessary support, advice, and guidance, and to establish where the patient was living.

Also on Saturday, the French authorities alerted UKHSA to a second confirmed case in France from an individual who had attended the University of Kent. Both cases lived in private accommodation, and at that stage, there was no apparent link between the two.

At 19:00 on Saturday evening, hospitals reported that a number of severely unwell young adults were presenting with symptoms consistent with meningococcal disease. Contact tracing of these individuals began immediately and continued into Sunday morning, March 15th. All those traced were offered precautionary antibiotics. So far, 700 doses have been administered.

Recognising the scale of the potential outbreak, at 10:00 on Sunday, UKHSA stood up a full scale response, including preparations for more widespread distribution of antibiotics on campus.

By 17:00 on Sunday, those antibiotics were in place, and distribution began to students in the two halls of residence where we were aware of cases, and by 18:00, a public health alert was issued.

Mr. Speaker, it is important that the House and the wider public understands that even before the public health alert was issued, students and young people, who had been in close contact with suspected cases, were being offered antibiotics.

This is precisely what one would expect as a rapid response, and I'm confident UKHSA acted as quickly and as comprehensively as possible.

In addition to cases involving students at the University of Kent, there were two cases identified involving sixth formers in Year 13, one of whom has sadly died.

UKHSA made contact with the head teachers at both schools, first thing on Monday morning, and have worked closely with schools to provide information, advice, and support, including a letter to parents that was issued that same day.

We are working closely with DfE on wider communications to schools across the Kent area, and a briefing with schools has taken place this morning.

Mr. Speaker, the strain associated with this outbreak is meningitis B, known as MenB. It is uncommon, and as we have seen, a serious and potentially lethal strain of meningococcal disease.

The onset of illness is often sudden, and early diagnosis and treatment with antibiotics are vital. It doesn't spread very easily. The bacteria is passed to others after a long period of close contact. For example, living with someone in shared accommodation, through prolonged kissing, or sharing vapes and drinks.

However, the symptoms are also easily mistaken for other common conditions, even for something like a hangover. And so, Mr. Speaker, let me now set out the current advice from UKHSA.

Anyone who attended Club Chemistry on March the 5th, 6th or 7th, and anyone who believes they were in close contact with someone who's confirmed or suspected to have meningitis, should attend a treatment centre and receive antibiotics.

There are four centres open in Canterbury today, with 11,000 doses available on site. Details about the location of these centres are available on the UKHSA website and are being promoted by the UKHSA, the NHS, my department, schools, and the university, as well as the BBC. And I encourage all media outlets to do the same.

There is no need to book an appointment, a single course of antibiotics is highly effective in preventing the contraction and spread of this disease in 90% of cases.

If you become worried about yourself, your child, or a friend, particularly if symptoms are getting worse, please seek medical help urgently. Anyone with symptoms should call NHS 111 or in an emergency, dial 999 to seek medical attention.

Mr. Speaker, people are understandably asking about a vaccine. From 2015, the MenB vaccine has been available on the NHS as part of routine childhood immunisations, but clearly most students would not be vaccinated.

Given the severity of the situation, I can confirm to the House that we will begin a targeted vaccination programme for students living in halls of residence at the University of Kent in Canterbury, which will begin in the coming days.

UKHSA will provide further advice on other cohorts in the coming days. On the question of wider

eligibility, we obviously follow the expert independent advice of the JCVI.

In light of this latest outbreak, 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.

Mr. Speaker, I will keep the House updated as the situation unfolds, and I commend this statement to the House.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/secretary-of-state-update-to-the-house-on-meningitis-outbreak>