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Advice on Health (No. 92)

## Meningitis Needs Early Diagnosis

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene)

Cerebro-spinal Meningitis is a TEREBRO-SPINAL Fever very serious disease that stays amongst us, claiming victims not in epidemic fashion just now, but in a most annoying and often tragic way here and there over the land. The catch about this disease is that it is very difficult to recognise in the early stages, and that between epidemics, when popping up as odd cases without apparent rhyme or reason, it is little children that suffer. Older children and adults get it more in epidemic times. It is a hard disease to pick early, yet it demands early diagnosis, for the longer the disease is unrecognised the greater is the risk.

In infants it is hard to differentiate from feeding upsets. Drowsiness and crossness are marked features with meningitis; vomiting may occur, too.
The bowel motions may be loose, green
and slimy. Mother may decide it is a
gastro-intestinal upset. Twitchings or
convulsions may show up. Crying or screaming attacks, or whimpering, or great restlessness will not subside, no matter what mother does. The face may be very pale. A bulging fontanelle—the little space not yet closed in the head bones or neck stiffness, are important signs. Holding the head back comes later—the task is to recognise the disease if possible before head retraction appears. If your baby's illness starts as above and goes on to show some of the important signs-neck stiffness, bulging fontanelle, convulsions or twitchingshurry up and call your doctor. Sulphonamide drugs given early will succeed in saving life; given late they may fail.

In older children-2 or 3 years and over-the disease is easier to pick. It usually begins with headache and vomiting. The child is cross and irritable, or may be drowsy or delirious. Convulsions or twitchings don't usually appear as in infants; on the infrequent occasions when they do, treat them as an urgent warning sign. Aching pains in joints, in the back, or neck must not be thought to be rheumatism when preceded by headache and vomiting, crossness or drowsiness. The spine and the neck become stiff, and in later stages the head may be drawn back. Sometimes a skin rash appears of scattered red spots, or of thick bluish-red blotchy patches you cannot hope to recognise the rash, as it varies from the above types at times, but any rash of short duration, maybe some hours only, should constitute another danger signal.

A sickness of the above type in an infant or young child should not be hesitated over. The quicker one of the new sulphonamide drugs is administered, the less the chance of fatal results. Although these drugs have already reduced the death rate, further reductions depend on getting them into the body earlier in the disease. Meningitis, in the early, cross, irritable, vomiting stage, is often allowed to drag on for days, and the other signs are missed as they develop. Don't throw away any chance of recovery for your child—learn to recognise meningitis early, and modern medical science will not fail you.