



UK Health  
Security  
Agency

## Information Sheet

# Meningococcal carriage investigation among university students in Canterbury and Medway, May 2026

**The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is responding to the recent outbreak of meningococcal meningitis in Canterbury, Kent, in March 2026. Meningococcal meningitis is a serious infection caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis*, which is often carried in the nose and throats of healthy people, especially young adults and particularly university students. Having meningococcal bacteria in your throat does not normally make you unwell, but in very rare instances, it can cause meningitis and blood poisoning (septicaemia).**

The meningococcal meningitis outbreak in Kent was very unusual. We want to find out how commonly the meningococcal bacteria – and, especially, the strain that caused the outbreak – are carried in the throats of university students in Kent. To do this, we need your help. We are asking you to take part in the investigation by

completing a short online survey and providing a throat swab, which will be taken by experienced healthcare staff at your local campus.



## Who are we?

We are public health and healthcare professionals at UKHSA, the national organisation that protects people from infectious diseases by finding outbreaks quickly and responding to them.

## Why are we doing this?

The meningococcal meningitis outbreak in Kent was very unusual because so many young adults became very unwell in a very short time. We now know that the outbreak was caused by a new variant (strain) of the meningococcal bacteria. However, we do not know how commonly the meningococcal bacteria, and especially the outbreak strain, are carried in young adults in Kent. To do this, we would like to collect throat swabs from 3 different groups of university students aged 18 to 24.

## Eligible students

In order to take part in this survey you should be aged 18 to 24 and one of the following

1. A student that studies in-person at the University of Kent Canterbury campus
2. A student that studies at the Canterbury Christ Church University Canterbury campus
3. A student that studies at any of the Universities at Medway campus (including students at any of the University of Greenwich, Canterbury Christ Church University, or the University of Kent)

Involvement in other surveys, or having received treatment with antibiotics as part of the outbreak in this area does not prevent you from taking part in this survey.

## What happens if I agree to take part?

If you are eligible and want to take part, you can sign up using link or QR code on the last page of this flyer. You will be asked to provide consent to take part and complete the first

part of a short online survey. Once completed, you will be given a unique code and asked to select a date and time of your convenience to attend a site on your university campus to complete the second part of the online survey and have a swab taken by a trained healthcare professional.

## Who is overseeing this study?

UKHSA Research and Public Health Ethics Governance Group (REGG) approval has been granted for this study.

## Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part.

## What are the risks of taking part?

Some people find a throat swab either tickly or a bit unpleasant but the process is very quick, and will be done by a trained health professional.

## What will happen to the sample I provide?

We will freeze all the swabs initially and then test them in batches to look for meningococcal bacteria, which will be sent to the UKHSA national reference laboratory for further testing.

## What will happen if you find meningococcal bacteria on my throat swab?

You do not have to worry even if we find the bacteria on your throat swab. This is common in young adults and finding the bacteria does not mean that you have any increased risk of developing meningococcal disease (meningitis or septicaemia). Most young adults will naturally get rid of the bacteria from the back of their throats over time.

Importantly, by the time we test the swabs in the laboratory, a few weeks will already have passed, and it is likely that you have already eliminated the meningococcal bacteria from the back of your throat. Also, antibiotics only

eliminate carriage of the meningococcal bacteria for a few days, so some people may continue to be carriers if they are exposed to the bacteria again, even if they are treated with antibiotics.

For this reason, we will not take any action if meningococcal bacteria are found on any of the throat swabs, even if it is the outbreak strain.

On very rare occasions, however, we may identify *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* (gonococcus), the bacteria that cause gonorrhoea, on the throat swab. This is because the gonococcus is genetically very closely related to the meningococcus and the bacteria can look very similar in the laboratory. If the rare instance that we identify a gonococcus on a throat swab, one of the doctors in the investigation team will telephone you to arrange further assessment at your local sexual health clinic.

## **What will happen to the information I provide and the results of my swab?**

UKHSA will keep all the information securely in accordance with data protection law, namely the UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

We are using a highly secure online platform (Snap Survey) for the online survey that we are asking you to complete. We will not ask you for any information that directly identifies you (such as your name, date of birth or address), except for your mobile number, for the reasons explained below. The survey does ask some personal questions to help us understand patterns of exposure, such as your age, gender, ethnicity, relationship status, housing, and social activities. We will link your survey answers with your throat swab results using your unique 5-digit code that you will receive after you complete the survey. All the information collected as part of the outbreak investigation, including the survey responses

and swab results, will be stored confidentially and securely in password protected databases within UKHSA servers and only the UKHSA investigation team will have access to the information.

We ask for your mobile number so that we can:

- text you your unique code that you will need to provide when you attend your swabbing appointment
- send you a reminder of the date, time and location of your swabbing appointment at your local university campus
- on very rare occasions, where we identify a gonococcus on a throat swab, a doctor in the UKHSA investigation team will telephone contact you to arrange further assessment at your local sexual health clinic

For further information regarding the information UKHSA collect and use, and your individuals rights over your information, please see the UKHSA privacy notice at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukhsa-privacy-notice/ukhsa-privacy-notice>.

## **What will happen if I don't want to carry on?**

If you agree to take part and later change your mind, you can withdraw at any time just by emailing us at [menb\\_carriage\\_kent2026@ukhsa.gov.uk](mailto:menb_carriage_kent2026@ukhsa.gov.uk) stating your unique code. You don't have to give us a reason for withdrawing from the investigation. Please let us know if you are not going to attend your swabbing appointment so that we can offer the appointment to someone else. Once you start the survey, you can exit at any time, although data that has been submitted to that point will be retained.

## What happens at the end of the investigation?

We will destroy your swab after one year. We will keep the information provided through the online survey and the swab results for at least 5 years after the end of the investigation.

At the end of the study, we will let your university know about the overall findings. Results will be published in scientific medical journals and will help to inform public health action in the future. You will not be identified in any report or publication.

## What if I have a complaint?

If you would like to make a complaint, please email the study team at [menb\\_carriage\\_kent2026@ukhsa.gov.uk](mailto:menb_carriage_kent2026@ukhsa.gov.uk). We will acknowledge your query or concern within 10 working days and give a response as to how it will be dealt with.

If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the UKHSA complaints team by emailing [complaints1@ukhsa.gov.uk](mailto:complaints1@ukhsa.gov.uk).

Further information on the complaints procedure can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-health-security-agency/about/complaints-procedure>.

**Yours sincerely,**

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On behalf of the UKHSA  
Meningococcal Outbreak  
Investigation Team



To take the survey, please scan the QR code or enter this shortlink into your browser

<https://qrco.de/mensurv>

