

# Group aims to boost meningitis profile

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A group founded by a grieving Waterloo mother after the death of her son is now part of the new 15-member Confederation of Meningitis Organizations, representing 12 countries.

The confederation's role is to heighten awareness of meningitis and to share best practices, information and research. It grew out of the first world conference on meningitis, held recently in England.

At the conference, Kathryn Blain, who founded the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada in 1998, three years after her son, Michael Longo, died of the disease, described her experience in lobbying government to provide free vaccine.

A delegation including parents and physicians met with members of the Ontario legislature in March to push for universal coverage.

In July, the province introduced free pneumococcal meningitis vaccines for children at high risk of the disease.

On Sept. 1, children born on or after Sept. 1, 2003, became eligible for free vaccine against one of the meningococcal forms of the potentially deadly illness.

Blain said some nations have well-developed meningitis foundations, while others such as Spain and Greece haven't started yet.

According to the World Health Organization, bacterial meningitis results in more than 171,000 deaths worldwide each year.

Blain stressed that fall and winter are high-risk seasons because people are in closer contact indoors.

Early symptoms of meningitis include fever, vomiting, headache, cold hands and feet, rapid breathing, drowsiness, stomach, joint or muscle pain.

More information on meningitis and the Canadian foundation can be found at [www.meningitis.ca](http://www.meningitis.ca). Click on Ask the Expert.