

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a **serious** illness caused by bacteria that infect the blood or membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It can lead to brain damage, disability, and death.

It is most common in infants and in people with certain medical conditions. College **frosh**, particularly those that live in **residence halls**, have a modestly increased risk of getting the disease. About 100 cases occur on college campuses a year, with 5-15 deaths.

Common **symptoms** of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, sensitivity to light, sleepiness, confusion, and seizures.

It can be treated with antibiotics, but **treatment** must be started early. Despite treatment, 10-15% of people who get the disease die from it. Another 10-20% suffer long-term consequences.

A Meningococcal vaccine protects against four of the five most common types of this disease, and can prevent 50%-70% of cases on college campuses. Historically, the protection has lasted for 3 -5 years. The newly released vaccine (Menactra) provides immunity for 5 years. Meningococcal vaccine may cause reactions such as pain or fever. Discuss contraindications and rare but serious side effects with your health care provider.

What Is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by Neisseria meningitidis bacteria. The two most common forms of meningococcal disease are meningitis, a bacterial infection of the fluid and covering of the spinal cord and brain; and septicemia, an infection of the blood stream. Meningitis has other causes as well, the most common being viral infection.

Immunizations are available from your doctor or may be obtained at the Student Health Center. Please make an immunization appointment by calling the Student Health Center, 831-459-2500. Meningococcal vaccination at the Student Health Center will be billed to the student's account. Your insurance may reimburse you.

How Common Is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is uncommon. In the U.S., each year there are about 2,500 cases (1-2 cases for every 100,000 people), with 300 to 400 occurring in California. Of 14 million students enrolled in colleges nation-wide, approximately 100 acquire meningococcal disease each year.

Are College Students At Increased Risk?

Overall, undergraduate students have lower risk than a non-student population (1.4 cases per 100,000 people per year). However, college freshmen living in dormitories have a modestly increased rate (4.6 cases per 100,000 people per year). Reasons for this increase are not fully understood, but are probably related to living in close proximity to each other.

How Are Meningococcal Bacteria Spread?

The bacteria are transmitted from person-to-person in secretions from the nose and throat. They are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near an infected person, but require close contact. The bacteria can live outside the body for only a few minutes; so if the germs contaminate a desk or a book, they soon die and won't infect a person who touches it later.

As many as 2 in 10 people carry the bacteria in the back of the nose and throat at any given time, especially in winter. Why only a very small number of those who have the bacteria in their nose and throat develop disease, while others remain healthy, is not understood.

How Can I Avoid Getting Meningococcal Disease?

You can protect yourself by maintaining good health and hygiene. As a general recommendation, you should wash your hand frequently. Avoid sharing materials that make mouth contact, such as eating utensils, bottles, cigarettes, or lip balm. Contact a healthcare provider immediately if you are in close contact with someone who is known or suspected to have meningococcal infection.

Immunization is Recommended For College Students

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommend routine meningococcal vaccination for college students. The vaccine is comprised of 4 strains of the bacteria, but does not include type B and other strains that account for nearly 50% of meningococcal cases in California.

Discuss the risks and benefits of the vaccination with your health care provider.

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