

Meningococcal Disease: Protect Your Child

Public health officials recommend that teenagers and college-bound students be immunized against a potentially fatal bacterial infection called meningococcal disease, a type of meningitis.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other leading medical organizations recommend routine meningococcal immunization:

- at the preadolescent health care visit (11- to 12-year-olds)
- at high school entry (15-year-olds) if the vaccine has not already been given
- for college freshmen living in dormitories.

At this time, due to the demand for this vaccine outpacing the current available supply, the CDC has temporarily recommended deferring vaccination of 11- to 12-year-olds at the preadolescent health care visit until sufficient vaccine supply is available. Vaccine is available for students entering high school and college freshmen living in dorms.

Meningococcal disease is a rare but potentially fatal bacterial infection. It can cause severe swelling of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or a serious blood infection (meningococemia). Meningococcal disease strikes up to 3,000 Americans each year. Nearly 30 percent of these cases are among teenagers and college students.

A meningococcal vaccine is available for use among persons aged 11 to 55 years. The vaccine provides protection against four of the five types of bacteria that cause meningococcal disease. Many parents are unaware of the dangers the disease poses to their children and that a vaccine is available. Immunization may help prevent up to 83 percent of cases among teens and college students. Immunization is the most effective way to prevent this very serious disease.

If you have questions, contact your primary health care provider or the school nurse at your child's school.

About Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious because early symptoms are similar to common viral illnesses. Symptoms of meningococcal disease may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion, exhaustion and/or a rash.

Meningococcal disease is spread through direct contact with respiratory and/or oral secretions from infected persons (for example, kissing or sharing drinking containers). It can develop and spread quickly throughout the body, so early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Even with immediate treatment, the disease can kill an otherwise healthy young person within hours of first symptoms. Of those who survive, up to 20 percent may endure permanent disabilities, including brain damage, deafness and limb amputations.

Lifestyle factors common among teenagers and college students are believed to put them at increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease. These lifestyle factors include crowded living situations (for example, dormitories, sleep-away camps), active or passive smoking and irregular sleeping habits. Teens should avoid sharing eating utensils and drinking out of the same container, since infections may spread through this type of close contact.

To learn more about meningococcal disease, vaccine information, and public health resources visit the following web sites.

- www.cdc.gov - This CDC website includes the CDC recommendations and information on the meningococcal vaccine.
- <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/communicable/Communicable/factsheets/Meningococcal.htm> - The Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services communicable disease fact sheet
- <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/LocalHealth/index.htm> - A list of local Wisconsin public health departments and contact information.
- American Academy of Family Physicians, www.aafp.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org
- Meningitis Foundation of America, www.musa.org
- National Meningitis Association, www.nmaus.org