

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious vaccine-preventable disease caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis*. The bacteria can cause meningitis (an inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or sepsis (an infection of the bloodstream). There are at least 12 types of *N. meningitidis*, called "serogroups." Most meningococcal disease is caused by Serogroups A, B, C, W and Y. Approximately 1,000 cases of meningococcal disease occur in the United States each year.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, nausea, vomiting, confusion and drowsiness. Indications of sepsis include fever, rash, hypotension (low blood pressure), shock and multi-organ failure. Meningococcal disease can be very serious, even life-threatening, in 48 hours or less. Death from sepsis can occur within a few hours of the beginning of the illness. Meningococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics, but quick medical attention is important. Even with antibiotic treatment, 10–15% of people infected with meningococcal disease will die. Long-term disabilities, including loss of limb(s), deafness, nervous system problems, or brain damage affect approximately 11–19% of survivors.

How is meningococcal infection spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread from person to person by exchanging respiratory and throat secretions during close or lengthy contact (for example, coughing or kissing), especially if living in the same dorm or household. Many people carry the bacteria in their throats without getting meningococcal disease. Since so many people carry the bacteria, most cases of meningococcal disease appear to be random and aren't linked to other cases.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than one year of age, adolescents, young adults, and people with certain medical conditions. College freshmen, particularly those who live in dormitories, have a slightly increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease. Meningococcal vaccination is a safe and effective way to reduce the risk for contracting meningococcal disease.

What is the best way to prevent meningococcal disease?

The single best way to prevent this disease is to be vaccinated. There are two meningococcal vaccines that protect against the five serogroups: MenACWY and MenB. All adolescents should receive MenACWY at age 11–12. A second dose (booster) is needed at age 16. The MenB series can also be given to teens and young adults starting at age 16. Adolescents may receive MenACWY and MenB vaccines at the same time. Pregnancy should not preclude vaccination with MenACWY and MenB, if indicated. In addition to being offered at physician offices and health departments, meningococcal vaccines may also be available at student health centers.

What else do I need to know?

The risks associated with meningococcal vaccine are much smaller than the risks associated with contracting the disease. People who are mildly ill at the time the immunization is scheduled can still get the vaccine; however, those with moderate or severe illnesses should usually wait until they recover. People should not get meningococcal vaccine if they have ever had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine. Some people who get the vaccine may develop redness or pain where the shot was given, and a small percentage of people develop a fever. These symptoms usually last for one or two days.

For more information about the meningococcal vaccine, access the Vaccine Information Statements at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/mening.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/mening-serogroup.html>

Adapted from the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/vaccine-info.html>