

# What You Need to Know About...

# Meningococcal Meningitis

## What is meningococcal meningitis? What causes it?

Meningococcal meningitis is a form of bacterial meningitis. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. It is a rare, but potentially fatal bacterial infection that can cause severe swelling of the fluid around the brain and spinal cord, or a serious blood infection.

## How is the disease spread?

The disease is spread from person to person through the air or by contact with saliva, usually through close, personal contact with an infected person. The disease can be spread through coughing, sneezing, kissing, or shared items like a drinking glass, utensils or cigarettes.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can progress rapidly and may resemble the flu. They can include fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, confusion, sleepiness and sensitivity to light. Some people also develop a rash mainly on their arms and legs.

## How many people contract or die from m. meningitis?

About 3,000 cases of meningococcal meningitis are diagnosed in the United States each year. One in 10 cases is fatal. Because meningococcal meningitis can progress rapidly, often within hours, about 20 percent of those who survive suffer long-term effects that can include brain damage, seizures or limb amputations.

## Why are college students at risk?

Studies show certain college students, especially freshmen living in dormitories, are at an increased risk for meningococcal meningitis compared to other persons in the same age group. Certain social behaviors, including drinking, smoking (both active and passive) and being in crowded situations like a dormitory may put college students at greater risk.

## Can meningococcal meningitis be prevented?

Yes. A safe and effective vaccine is available to protect against four of the five most common types of meningitis. Studies show that up to 80 percent of cases that occur among college students can be prevented with vaccination. The vaccine protects for approximately three to five years.

## What do health officials recommend?

Both the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend that college students, especially those living in dormitories, be educated about meningitis and the benefits of vaccination.

## Where can I get more information on the disease and the vaccine?

Visit the web sites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), the American College Health Association at: [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org), or for North Carolina, the Immunization Branch at: [www.immunizenc.com](http://www.immunizenc.com). Talk to your physician or someone at your local health department for more information.





## Does the meningococcal vaccine prevent all forms of meningitis?

No. The currently available meningococcal vaccine protects against four of the five most common types of meningococcal bacteria. In total, the vaccine can be expected to prevent about half of all cases of invasive meningococcal disease that occurs in the U.S. The meningococcal vaccine does not prevent meningitis caused by other bacteria such as “strep” or Hib bacteria.

## Is the vaccine effective?

The vaccine protects (for several years or longer) at least 85 percent of older children, adolescents and young adults who receive it.

## What about side effects?

More than half of the people who receive the vaccine have no side effects at all. Of those people who do have a reaction, most have only a mild reaction. Mild reactions are experienced by up to 40 percent of people receiving the vaccine. These reactions include pain and redness where the shot was given.

In rare cases, about 2 percent of cases, people have a moderate reaction to the vaccine. Moderate reactions are usually a fever lasting no more than 48 hours.

Serious reactions are an allergic response to a part of the vaccine that can cause difficulty in breathing. Some signs of a serious allergic reaction can include difficulty breathing, weakness, hoarseness or wheezing, a fast heart beat, hives, dizziness, paleness, or swelling of the throat.

## What can I do if I have a reaction to the vaccine?

If you do notice a serious reaction, you should contact your doctor immediately. Aspirin-free pain reliever can be used to reduce fever and soreness associated with mild and moderate reactions.

It is important to remember that your child's chances of being harmed by meningococcal disease are far greater than any chance of being harmed by the vaccine. Immunizations are one of the most important ways parents can protect their children against serious infectious diseases.

## How widespread is meningococcal meningitis? Would I need the vaccine if I travel?

Although large epidemics of meningococcal meningitis do not occur in the United States, some countries experience large, periodic epidemics. Overseas travelers should check to see if meningococcal vaccine is recommended for their destination. Travelers should receive the vaccine at least one week before departure, if possible. Information on areas for which meningococcal vaccine is recommended can be obtained by calling the CDC at (404)-332-4565.



## References and Resources

Ask your doctor or nurse. They can give you the vaccine package insert or suggest other sources of information.

- Call your local or state health department's immunization program.
- Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
  - Call 1-800-232-2522 (English).
  - Call 1-800-232-0233 (Español).
  - Visit the National Center for Infectious Disease's meningococcal disease website at [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal\\_g.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm).
  - Visit CDC's Travelers Health website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel).
- National Immunization Program's website at [www.cdc.gov/nip](http://www.cdc.gov/nip).
- National Network for Immunization Information at [www.immunizationinfo.org](http://www.immunizationinfo.org).