

MENINGITIS INFORMATION SHEET

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Immunization Recommended for Adolescents and College-bound Students to Prevent a Serious Infection that Causes Meningitis.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is any infection caused by bacteria called meningococci (muh-nin-jo-cox-eye). This infection most often leads to severe swelling around the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or infection of the bloodstream (meningococemia). Less often, it leads to other less severe illnesses, like arthritis and pneumonia.

Are adolescents and young adults more vulnerable?

Yes, adolescents and college-bound students are particularly vulnerable to this potentially deadly disease. In fact, 30 percent of all cases occur among adolescents and young adults. Up to 2,800 Americans get the infection each year, killing up to 10 percent of those who become infected.

Is meningococcal disease serious?

Meningococcal disease is very serious. Even with treatment, approximately one out of every ten people who get it will die. And about two in ten survivors will have permanent problems including brain damage, hearing loss, and limb amputations.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal bacteria are spread through coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat of an infected person (for example, through kissing). The bacteria may also be spread by sharing items, like utensils, cigarettes or bottles, but not by casual contact such as breathing air where an infected person has been.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The early symptoms of meningococcal disease can include fever, headache, body aches and a stiff neck. Because these early symptoms may be mild and similar to those of less serious viral illnesses like a cold or the flu, it would not be unusual for a person to delay seeking treatment. But symptoms can progress very fast, killing an otherwise healthy young person in 48 hours or less, so it is critical to seek medical attention quickly. Other symptoms that also may occur are nausea, vomiting, confusion, sleepiness, sensitivity to light and a rash (usually dark purple spots on the arms or legs).

Who should get the vaccine?

U.S. health authorities recommend immunization for all pre-teens at the 11-12 year old health care visit. For those not previously immunized, vaccination also is recommended at the time of high school entry or at 15 years old, whichever comes first. Vaccination also is recommended for college-bound freshmen living in dormitories before they depart for campus. All other adolescents and college students wishing to reduce their risk of contracting the disease may elect to be immunized.

Why is immunization recommended for certain adolescents and college-bound students?

Due to lifestyle factors, such as prolonged, close proximity among large groups of adolescents (e.g., dorms, sleep-away camps) and smoking (including second-hand smoke), certain adolescents and college freshmen living in dormitories are at increased risk for contracting the disease.

Will immunization prevent meningococcal disease?

Vaccination protects against four of the five most common types of meningococcal bacteria (called types A, C, Y and W-135). These four types cause more than eight of every ten cases in adolescents and young adults. Currently, no vaccine is available in the U.S. to protect against type B, which causes about two in ten cases in adolescents and young adults.

Is immunization effective?

A conjugate meningococcal vaccine is available for pre-teens, adolescents and adults (aged 11 to 55 years) and provides protection against four of the five serogroups or types of *N. meningitidis* that cause almost all clinical disease among teenagers and college students. In general, the benefits of a conjugate vaccine include a longer lasting immune response and improved strength of the immune response. The older polysaccharide vaccine is available for use in the same age group, but this vaccine offers protection for only three to five years. Unfortunately, there is no vaccine in the U.S. to protect against serogroup B disease, which is most common in infants.

Is the meningococcal vaccine safe?

Yes, the vaccine is safe. As with all vaccines, there can be minor reactions, including pain and redness at the injection site, headache, fatigue or a vague feeling of discomfort. The vaccine can be given at the same time as the pertussis booster that many children receive during the preadolescent visit at 11 to 12 years of age.

Who recommends the vaccine?

The vaccine is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College Health Association, American Medical Association, Society for Adolescent Medicine and many other health care organizations.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information about meningococcal disease and the benefits of vaccination, talk to your clinician or health care provider. The Web sites below also offer additional information about meningococcal disease and the benefits of vaccination:

American Academy of Pediatrics
<http://www.aap.org>

American Academy of Family Physicians
<http://www.aafp.org>

American College Health Association
<http://www.acha.org>

American College of Physicians
<http://www.acponline.org>

American Medical Association
<http://www.ama-assn.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases
<http://www.n.d.org>

Society for Adolescent Medicine
<http://www.adolescenthealth.org>

National Meningitis Association
<http://www.nmaus.org>

American College of Prevention.
Resource Materials for Implementation of Meningococcal Immunization Recommendations for Adolescents and College-bound Students.

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