

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Meningococcal disease is serious illness caused by bacteria. It is the leading cause of bacterial meningitis in children 2-18 years of age in the United States. Meningococcal bacteria can cause meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or sepsis (an infection of the bloodstream). Symptoms of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, nausea, vomiting, confusion and drowsiness. Symptoms of sepsis include fever, shock, and coma. Death from sepsis can occur within 12 hours of the beginning of the illness- meningococcal disease infections that occur in childcare centers, elementary schools, high schools and colleges often cause panic in the community. Every year about 2,600 people in the United States are infected with meningococcus. Ten to 15 percent of these people die, in spite of treatment with antibiotics. Of those who live, another 10 percent lose their arms or legs, become deaf, have problems with their nervous systems, become mentally retarded or suffer seizures or strokes.

How do you catch a meningococcal infection?

Usually meningococcal infection is acquired after intimate contact with an infected person. Intimate contact includes kissing, sharing toothbrushes or eating utensils or frequently eating or sleeping in the same dwelling as an infected individual.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than 1 year of age and in people with certain medical conditions. College freshmen, particularly those who live in dormitories, have a slightly increased risk of getting meningococcal disease. The risk for meningococcal disease among nonfreshman college students is similar to that for the general population; however, the vaccine is safe and effective and therefore can be provided to nonfreshman undergraduates who want to reduce their risk for meningococcal disease.

What can be done to decrease risk?

The meningococcal vaccine can prevent four types of meningococcal disease. these include two of the three most common types in the United States. Meningococcal vaccine cannot prevent all types of the disease, but it does help to protect people who might become sick if they don't get the vaccine. The vaccine is available through a variety of setting including physician offices and university/college student health centers.

What about the vaccine?

A vaccine, like any other medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. People should not get meningococcal vaccine if they have ever had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of vaccine. Some people who get the vaccine 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. The risk of the vaccine is safer than getting the disease. People who are mildly ill at the time the shot is scheduled, and women who are pregnant, can still get the vaccine. Those with moderate or severe illness should usually wait until they recover. College students and their parents should discuss the timing, risks and benefits of vaccination with their health care providers. For more information about the meningococcal vaccine, access the Vaccine Information Sheet at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site <http://www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/VIS>. If college students decide to be vaccinated against meningococcal meningitis, they (or their parents if they are less than 18 years of age) should contact their health care provider or the university/college student health center where they will be attending to inquire about receiving the vaccine. Although the need for revaccination has not been determined, antibody levels rapidly decline in two to three years, and if indications still exist for vaccination, revaccination may be considered three to five years after receipt of the first dose.

Adapted from CDC and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Vaccine Education Center Publications.