FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE ON CAMPUS

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a rare, but potentially fatal bacterial infection, and most commonly leads to meningitis, an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord, or meningococcal septicemia, an infection of the blood.

What causes meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by Neisseria meningitidis, a leading cause of bacterial meningitis in older children and young adults in the United States. There are five types of meningococcal bacteria (or serogroups) that circulate worldwide: A, B, C, Y, and W-135. Evidence shows approximately 70 to 80 percent of cases in the college age group are caused by serogroup C, Y, or W-135, which are potentially vaccine-preventable.

The number of cases caused by each type varies by location. For instance, type A rarely causes cases in the United States but is the most common cause of epidemics in Africa and Asia. Different age groups appear to be disproportionately affected by different types. Type B is the most common type in infants and recently was associated with cases in Oregon, while type Y causes the majority of cases in those 65 years and older. Type C is associated with outbreaks in communities and schools, including colleges and universities. The proportion of disease caused by different types also changes over time.

How many people get meningococcal disease each year?

Meningococcal disease strikes 1,400 to 3,000 Americans each year and is responsible for approximately 150 to 300 deaths. Adolescents and young adults account for nearly 30 percent of all cases of meningococcal disease in the United States. In addition, approximately 100 to 125 cases of meningococcal disease occur on college campuses each year, and five to 15 students will die as a result.

How serious is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal infection is contagious and progresses very rapidly. It can easily be misdiagnosed as the flu or other minor febrile infections, and, if not treated early, meningococcal disease can lead to death or permanent disabilities. One in five of those who survive will suffer from long-term side effects, such as brain damage, hearing loss, seizures, or limb amputation.
How is meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread person-to-person through the air by respiratory droplets (e.g., coughing, sneezing). The bacteria also can be transmitted through direct contact with an infected person, such as kissing or coughing.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?

Symptoms of meningococcal disease often resemble the flu or other minor febrile illnesses, making it sometimes difficult to diagnose, and may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and confusion.

Students who notice these symptoms - in themselves, friends, or others - should contact their college health service or hospital immediately.

What are the complications of meningococcal disease?

If not treated early, meningococcal disease can lead to death or permanent disabilities. One in five of those who survive will suffer from long-term side effects, such as brain damage, hearing loss, seizures, or limb amputation.

Who is at risk of getting meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease. Certain groups, though, are at higher risk. These include infants, adolescents, and college students, particularly those living in residence halls. Disease rates decline after infancy, but begin to rise again in early adolescence, peaking between the ages of 15 and 20 years.

Due to lifestyle factors, such as crowded living situations, bar patronage, active or passive smoking, irregular sleep patterns, and sharing personal items, some college students may be more likely to acquire meningococcal disease than the general college population.

Certain conditions also increase a person’s susceptibility to the disease. Persons with immature or damaged immune systems are at increased risk. Respiratory tract infections also increase a person’s risk of getting the disease. There also may be certain genetic factors that increase the risk of infection.

Should students be vaccinated?

Many cases of meningococcal disease can be prevented. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all adolescents 11 through 18 years of age and all first-year college students living in dormitories be vaccinated against meningococcal disease. The American College Health Association (ACHA) supports these recommendations and further states that all other college students under the age of 25 years who wish to reduce their risk for the disease may choose to be vaccinated.
Why should college students consider getting the meningococcal vaccine?

Meningococcal vaccination is recommended by ACHA for all first-year students living in residence halls to protect against four of the five most common strains (or types) of N. meningitidis (A, C, Y, W-135).

Data shows an increased incidence of meningococcal disease among adolescents and young adults, including college students. In persons 15 to 24 years of age, the majority of cases are caused by potentially vaccine-preventable strains.

Who should be vaccinated?

- All adolescents 11 through 18 years of age
- First-year college students living in residence halls
- Undergraduate students 25 years of age or younger who wish to reduce their risk for the disease may choose to be vaccinated
- Students with medical conditions that compromise immunity (e.g., HIV, absent spleen, antibody deficiency, chemotherapy, immuno-suppressants)
- Other groups (non-college age) are recommended for vaccination
  - Travelers to endemic areas of the world
  - Lab workers with potential exposure to meningococcus

How effective is vaccination?

Meningococcal vaccination is recommended for all first-year students living in residence halls to protect against four of the five most common strains (or types) of N. meningitidis (A, C, Y, W-135). In persons 15 to 24 years of age, 70 to 80 percent of cases are caused by potentially vaccine-preventable strains.

Is vaccination safe? Are there any adverse side effects?

Vaccination is safe and effective, and adverse reactions are mild and infrequent. The most commonly reported reactions by adolescents and adults in clinical studies were pain at the injection site, headache, and fatigue. These respond to simple measures (ibuprofen or acetaminophen) and resolve spontaneously with a few days.