

Minnesota Department of Health

Meningococcal Disease and the Vaccine: What College Students Need to Know

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by a bacteria. It can cause meningitis, which is an infection of the brain and spinal cord, and it can also cause blood infections.

About 2,600 people get the disease each year in the U.S. And up to one out of seven (10-14%) of those who get the disease will die. Of those who survive, up to one out of five will have permanent disabilities, such as deafness, mental retardation, loss of limbs, or seizures.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms can include a high fever, headache, a very stiff neck, confusion, nausea, sensitivity to light, vomiting, and exhaustion. If a person has a blood disease, a rash may also develop.

A person may become seriously ill very quickly, so contact your student health service or health care provider immediately if you have two or more of these symptoms.

How does meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread by contact with secretions from the nose and throat. Kissing, sharing silverware, drinking directly from the same container, sharing a cigarette or lipstick, coughing, and having close social contact are examples of how this disease spreads.

How can I protect myself from getting meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but college freshmen living in dorms are at increased risk and should seriously consider getting immunized.

Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to prevent most meningococcal disease. Other ways to prevent infection include washing your hands often and avoiding sharing silverware, drinking containers, lipstick, and smoking materials.

What should I know about the meningococcal vaccine?

Meningococcal vaccine is highly effective at protecting against four strains of the meningococcal bacteria. Three strains are common in the U.S. and the fourth strain protects travelers to certain countries where the disease is more common. The vaccine does not contain a strain that is more commonly found in infants and may cause some cases in adolescents.

The vaccine is recommended for all college freshmen who live in a dormitory. The vaccine has also been recommended for 11 – 12 year olds since 2005, so it is possible that incoming freshmen may have already received a dose. If you received a dose before age 16, you should get a booster before you go to college.

Most people have mild side effects from the vaccine, such as redness or pain where the shot was given. A vaccine, like any medicine, may cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. This risk is extremely small. Getting the meningococcal vaccine is much safer than getting the disease.

How can I learn more about meningococcal disease and vaccine?

Ask your student health service, your doctor, or call your local health department's immunization program or the CDC at 1-800-232-4636. Or visit these websites:

- Minnesota Department of Health
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/meningococcal/index.html
- Immunization Action Coalition
www.immunize.org/vis/vis_menin.asp
- CDC's Meningococcal Vaccination
www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/mening/default.htm
- American College Health Association
www.acha.org/projects_programs/meningitis/index.cfm
- National Meningitis Association
www.nmaus.org



Immunization Program
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975
651-201-5503 or 1-800-657-3970
www.health.state.mn.us/immunize