

Minnesota Department of Health

# Meningococcal Vaccine: Why Preteens and Teens Should Get It

*Preteens should receive a single shot of meningococcal vaccine during their 11-12 year old check-up and a booster dose at age 16 years. If your teenager missed getting the vaccine at their check-up, ask the doctor about getting it now.*

## **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. The infection can cause death or lifelong disability.

About 2,600 people get the disease each year. 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.

Meningococcal disease often progresses so quickly that a person can be perfectly well and, in just a few hours, be hospitalized in critical condition. Antibiotics can be used to treat meningococcal infections, but often can't be given soon enough to help.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than 1 year of age. While teens are less likely to be infected than infants, disease levels increase in adolescence starting around age 11, and peak around age 19 years.

## **What are the symptoms of meningitis?**

Symptoms can include 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. The person may become seriously ill very quickly

and early symptoms can easily be mistaken for influenza.

## **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 (living in the same household) are examples of how this disease spreads.

## **How can you prevent meningococcal disease?**

Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to prevent most meningococcal disease. Seventy-six percent of cases among 11- 19 year olds are vaccine-preventable.

Other ways for everyone to prevent infection include washing your hands often and avoiding sharing silverware, drinking containers, lipstick, and smoking materials.

## **What is the meningococcal vaccine?**

Meningococcal vaccine (MCV4) is highly effective at protecting against four strains of the meningococcal bacteria. Three strains are common in the United States 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.

## **Who should get the meningococcal vaccine?**

Several national groups, including the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recommend that all children ages 11



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](http://www.health.state.mn.us/immunize)

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through 12 years receive meningococcal vaccine as part of their preteen health care visit, followed by a booster dose at age 16 years. Vaccination is also recommended for all adolescents ages 13 through 18 years who did not receive a dose at age 11-12 years.

The CDC also recommends that individuals age 2 through 54 years who have certain conditions that weaken their immune system get two doses of the vaccine two months apart, including teens who are HIV positive. These persons should also receive booster shots every three to five years depending on their age. Talk to your health care provider if your preteen or teen has a condition that makes it harder for their body to fight off infection.

### **What are the risks from meningococcal vaccine?**

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.**

### **Can I get a free or low cost meningococcal shot?**

Yes, if you don't have insurance or your insurance does not cover the cost of the meningococcal vaccine, you may be able to find a free or low cost meningococcal shot.

- Talk to your doctor or clinic. If the person in need of vaccination is 18 years old or younger, they may be eligible for the Minnesota Vaccines for Children program. This program covers the cost of the vaccine; however, the parent may have to pay an administration fee of up to \$14.69 per shot.
- Talk to your city or county health department. They may be able to provide a low cost meningococcal shot.

### **How can I learn more?**

Ask your doctor or clinic, 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](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/meningococcal/index.html)
- CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases  
[www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/mening/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/mening/default.htm)
- Immunization Action Coalition  
[www.immunize.org/vis/vis\\_menin.asp](http://www.immunize.org/vis/vis_menin.asp)
- National Meningitis Association  
[www.nmaus.org](http://www.nmaus.org)