



MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

What is meningitis?

- Meningitis is an inflammation of the linings of the brain and spinal cord caused by either viruses or bacteria.
- Viral meningitis is more common than bacterial meningitis and usually occurs in late spring and summer. Most cases of viral meningitis run a short, uneventful course.
- Bacterial meningitis occurs rarely and sporadically throughout the year, although outbreaks tend to occur in late winter and spring. Bacterial meningitis in college-aged students is most likely caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* or *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. Meningococcal meningitis requires early diagnosis and treatment. It can result in hearing loss, kidney failure, amputation of limbs, permanent brain injury or death within 24-48 hours.
- Death occurs in approximately 10% of cases, or about 300 Americans annually.
- With early diagnosis and treatment, the likelihood of full recovery is increased.

What are signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease?

- Common early symptoms include fever, severe sudden headache accompanied by mental changes (malaise, lethargy), nausea, vomiting, neck stiffness, and sensitivity to light.
- A rash may begin as a flat, red eruption, mainly on arms and legs. It may then evolve into a rash of small dots that do not change with pressure (petechiae).

How is meningococcal disease transmitted?

- The disease is transmitted through the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and direct contact with persons infected with the disease.

Why are college students at risk?

- Since the early 1990's, there has been an increase in meningitis outbreaks in the U.S.
- The number of cases has nearly doubled among young adults (15-24 years of age) from 1991-1996.
- Bacterial meningitis is believed to be on the rise among college students.
- Data suggests certain social behaviors such as exposure to passive and active smoking, bar patronage and excessive alcohol consumption may increase the student's risk for contracting the disease.
- Roommates and friends who have had intimate contact with the oral secretions of a person diagnosed with meningococcal disease are at risk. Examples of such contact include kissing, sharing eating utensils and being exposed to droplet contamination from the nose or throat.
- Geographic diversity can create a bacterial stew on campus.

How can one reduce the risk of contracting meningococcal disease?

- Consider vaccination with Menomune meningococcal vaccine. Menomune is generally safe and effective. However, some reactions (soreness and redness at the injection site, mild fever) can happen with all vaccines. As with any vaccine, vaccination may not protect 100% of all susceptible individuals.
- Maximize your body's own immune system response. A lifestyle that includes a balanced diet, adequate sleep, appropriate exercise, and the avoidance of excessive stress is very important. Avoid exposure to and infections of the upper respiratory tract, and inhalation of cigarette smoke.