

FACTS ABOUT MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

Meningococcal Disease Snapshot

- Meningococcal disease is a rare, but potentially deadly, bacterial infection that can take the form of meningitis (an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord) or meningococemia (a blood infection). This infection is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*, a potentially life-threatening bacterium.
- Teenagers and college students account for nearly 30 percent of all reported cases of meningococcal disease in the U.S. Of those who survive, nearly 20 percent suffer long-term disabilities, including brain damage, deafness and limb amputations.

Meningococcal Disease Among Teenagers and College Students

- Teenagers and college students have an unusually high death rate from the disease; nearly one of every four cases may result in death.
- Lifestyle factors common among teenagers and college students are believed to put them at increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease. These lifestyle factors include crowded living situations (e.g., dormitories, sleep-away camps), active or passive smoking and irregular sleeping habits.

Immunization Recommendations for Teenagers and College Students

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other leading medical organizations recommend routine meningococcal immunization for adolescents during the preadolescent doctor's visit (11- to 12-year-olds),¹ adolescents at high school entry (15-year-olds), if they have not previously been immunized, and for college freshmen living in dormitories.

Vaccination to Prevent Meningococcal Disease

- A conjugate vaccine is available for adolescents and adults (aged 11 to 55 years) to protect against four of the five strains of bacterium that cause meningococcal disease. In persons 15 to 24 years of age, up to 83 percent of cases are caused by potentially vaccine-preventable strains.
- Vaccination with the conjugate vaccine is considered safe. The most commonly reported reactions are pain, redness and induration at the injection site (one to two days), headache, fatigue and malaise.

Transmission and Symptoms of the Disease

- Meningococcal bacteria are transmitted through direct contact with secretions from infected persons (e.g., through coughing or kissing). The majority of meningococcal disease cases occur in winter and early spring.
- Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed, since symptoms are similar to those of common viral illnesses. Symptoms may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion, exhaustion and/or a rash.

Additional Information

- Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services communicable disease fact sheet, <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/communicable/Communicable/factsheets/Meningococcal.htm>
- American Academy of Family Physicians, www.aafp.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org
- Meningitis Foundation of America, www.musa.org
- National Meningitis Association, www.nmaus.org