

Meningococcal Meningitis and College Students

Meningococcal Disease is a **potentially fatal bacterial infection** that causes meningitis and other life threatening consequences. While this disease is rare, infection can rapidly lead to nervous system injury, dysfunction of vital organs, severe disabilities, or death.

Why special concerns for college students? Studies show that college students living in group settings (especially freshmen living in residence halls) are at modestly increased risk of becoming ill with meningococcal disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) therefore recommends that college freshmen living in residence halls receive meningococcal vaccine prior to or early after their arrival on campus. Other students, especially those living in group situations or planning foreign travel to risk locations, should consider immunization and follow risk reduction strategies as well.

How is it spread? Meningococcal infection and many other communicable diseases are spread through close contact with the respiratory secretions of individuals who may be asymptomatic, but who carry this organism in their bodies. Infection can be transmitted via coughing, sneezing, kissing, or sharing beverages, food, eating and drinking utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, etc.

Symptoms of disease resemble the flu initially, but rapidly become severe, and include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, lethargy, weakness, and confusion, and require immediate medical attention.

Meningococcal Vaccine and Where to Get It: The newest formulation of meningococcal vaccine protects against four of the five most common strains of meningococcal bacteria. Vaccine immunity takes two weeks to develop, and protection lasts a number of years. Immunization is available to regularly enrolled and enrolling SSU students (subject to vaccine availability) and students are charged only for the SSU Student Health Center's (SHC) costs to purchase the vaccine. Students may also seek immunization from their private health care provider or a County Health Department Clinic. Call the SHC @ **707 664-2921** for information or an appointment.

Risk Reduction Strategies: Since no vaccine is 100% effective and some cases of meningococcal disease are caused by subtypes of the bacteria that are not inhibited by any currently available vaccine, both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals can reduce their risk of exposure to this and other harmful infectious organisms by avoiding oral contact with the food, drinks, eating utensils, etc. of others and washing their hands regularly. They should also avoid situations that lower resistance to infection such as smoking, erratic eating habits, lack of rest, unwise use of alcohol and other drugs, etc.

Check the SHC website <http://www.sonoma.edu/SHC/> or the Centers for Disease Control website at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo for more information or updates.