

Meningococcal Meningitis and College Students

Meningococcal Disease is a **serious bacterial infection** that often results in meningitis, nervous system injury, dysfunction of vital organs, severe disabilities, or death.

How is it spread? This and many other communicable diseases are spread by close contact with the respiratory secretions of people who carry the bacterial organism in their bodies, sometimes without symptoms. Meningococcal infection can be transmitted via coughing, sneezing, kissing, and sharing beverages, food, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, etc.

Symptoms initially resemble the flu, but rapidly become severe and can include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, lethargy, weakness and confusion. People with these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.

Why special concerns for college students? Although meningococcal infection is not particularly common, the risk of getting this potentially fatal disease peaks during the teens & early twenties. Risk is magnified for those living in group settings - as most college students do. In addition, the U. S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recently found that protective immunity from meningococcal vaccine decreases after 4-5 years. This leaves those who were vaccinated at the recommended early adolescent age with insufficient protection during their higher risk college years.

How has this changed CDC vaccine recommendations? January 2011 recommendations call for an initial dose of meningococcal vaccine at age 11 or 12, followed by a second dose at age 16 or soon thereafter. The CDC's specific recommendation for college students is that those under 22 who received an initial dose before age 16 receive a second (booster dose). This means that many previously immunized high school & college students need a second dose. College students under 22 who never got this vaccine should do so now. Those of any age planning travel to high risk locations or working in high risk settings and have never been immunized or who were immunized more than 4-5 years ago should also get immunized or re-immunized with meningococcal vaccine.

Meningococcal Vaccine & Where to Get It: The newest formulations of meningococcal vaccine protect against four of the five most common strains of meningococcal bacteria. Vaccine immunity takes two weeks to develop and protection from an initial dose lasts 4-5 years. This vaccine is offered to SSU students by the Student Health Center (subject to availability). Students are charged only for the Health Center's costs to purchase the vaccine. Uninsured students age 18 & under may be eligible for federally subsidized vaccine, which can result in further savings. Call the SHC @ **707 664-2921** for information or an appointment. Students may also seek immunization from a private health care provider or community clinic at their own expense.

Risk Reduction Strategies: Since no vaccine is 100% effective and some cases of meningococcal disease are caused by a subtype of the bacteria that a current vaccine does not prevent, all individuals should reduce their risk of exposure to this and other harmful infectious organisms by washing their hands regularly and avoiding oral contact with the food, drinks, eating utensils, etc. of others. They should also avoid circumstances that lower resistance to infection such as smoking, lack of rest, erratic diet, unwise use of alcohol and other drugs, etc. For more information and updates, check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo .