

Meningococcal Disease

Information for College Students and Parents of Children at Residential Schools and Overnight Camps

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection of the bloodstream or meninges (a thin lining covering the brain and spinal cord).

Who gets meningococcal disease?

Anyone can get the disease, but it is more common in infants and children. For some college students, such as freshmen living in dormitories, there is an increased risk of meningococcal disease. Between 100 and 125 cases of meningococcal disease occur on college campuses every year in the United States; between 5 and 15 college students die each year as a result of infection. Currently, no data are available regarding whether children at overnight camps or residential schools are at the same increased risk for the disease. However, these children can be in settings similar to college freshmen living in dormitories. Other persons at increased risk include household contacts of a person known to have had the disease, and people traveling to parts of the world where meningitis is prevalent.

How is the germ meningococcus spread?

The meningococcus germ is spread by direct close contact with nose or throat discharges of an infected person. Many people carry this particular germ in their nose or throat without any sign of illness, while others may develop serious symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

High fever, headache, vomiting, stiff neck and a rash are symptoms of meningococcal disease. Among people who develop meningococcal disease, 10-15% die, in spite of treatment with antibiotics. Of those who live, permanent brain damage, hearing loss, kidney failure, loss of arms or legs, or chronic nervous system problems can occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to ten days after exposure, but usually within five days.

What is the treatment of meningococcal disease?

Antibiotics, such as penicillin G or ceftriaxone, can be used to treat meningococcal disease.

Is there a vaccine to prevent meningococcal meningitis?

Yes, a safe and effective vaccine is available. The vaccine is 85% to 100% effective in preventing four kinds of bacteria (serogroups A,C,Y,W-135) that cause about 70% of the disease in the United States. The vaccine is safe, with mild and infrequent side effects, such as redness and pain at the injection site lasting up to two days. After vaccination, immunity develops within seven to ten days and remains effective for approximately three to five years. As with any vaccine, vaccination against meningitis may not protect 100% of all susceptible individuals.

How do I get more information about meningococcal disease and vaccination?

Contact your family physician or your student health service. Additional information is also available on the websites of the New York State Department of Health, www.health.state.ny.us; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/ncid/dbmd/diseaseinfo; and the American College Health Association, www.acha.org.