

meningococcal disease— information for college students



Your pediatrician and the American Academy of Pediatrics believe it is important for all college-bound young men and women to know about a serious illness called meningococcal disease. Certain college students have a higher risk of getting this disease, and it can be deadly.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacteria. Many people carry meningococcal bacteria in their throats but never get the disease. However, in a few people it can lead to 2 common forms of the disease: meningococcemia and meningitis. Meningococcal disease can affect the blood (meningococcemia) and/or brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and is **life-threatening unless diagnosed and treated early**.

Each year in the United States about 3,000 people get meningococcal disease. While it can strike anybody, **college students living in dorms** are at a higher risk than other people of the same age. It is easy for infections to spread in crowded dorms where students live in close contact with each other.

Symptoms

The symptoms of meningococcal disease often are mistaken for other, less serious illnesses like the flu. Common symptoms include

- High **fever** (over 101.4°F)
- A flat, pink to red **rash** mainly on the lower arms and legs, including the hands and feet, with small bruises or bleeding under the skin
- **Nausea**
- **Vomiting**
- Generalized **aching** or weakness
- Sudden, severe **headache**
- **Confusion**
- **Sensitivity** to light
- **Stiff neck** in combination with headache and sensitivity to light (may signal the meningitis form of the illness and should never be ignored)

It is **important to seek medical treatment** imme-

diately. Meningococcemia or meningitis **can get worse very quickly**, even within a few hours from the start of symptoms. If untreated, the disease can be fatal or cause kidney failure, hearing loss, limb amputation, or lifelong problems with the nervous system.

Treatment

There are **antibiotics** that are used to treat meningococcal disease. When given shortly after the onset of symptoms, these antibiotics may prevent the disease from getting worse.

Because this infection spreads to others very easily, anyone in close contact with a person with meningococcal disease should consult their physician and also should be given an antibiotic to help prevent meningococcal disease. Ideally, this antibiotic should be given within 24 hours of the diagnosis of meningococcal disease.

Vaccination

The best protection from meningococcal disease is to be vaccinated. A safe and effective **vaccine is now available** to prevent meningococcal disease caused by 3 of the 4 most common types of meningococcal bacteria among college students. However, the vaccination provides protection against only about one half to two thirds of the cases of meningococcal infections. Although mild side effects, like redness and swelling at the injection site or a slight fever, can occur from the vaccination, these are considered uncommon and usually go away on their own in a few days. Serious allergic reactions to the vaccine are **extremely rare**.

Who should be vaccinated?

If you are about to enter college and are planning to live in a dorm, talk to your pediatrician about getting the meningococcal vaccine **before going to school**. It may not be necessary to reimmunize students who already received the meningococcal vaccine in the last 3 to 5 years, but be sure to check with your pediatrician.

Take care of yourself

You can help reduce your risk of contracting meningitis by **avoiding** smoking, alcohol consumption, excessive stress, and exposure to upper respiratory infections. Instead, strengthen your immune system by adopting a **healthy lifestyle** that includes enough sleep, exercise, and a balanced diet. Other common sense tips: **avoid** sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, and **wash your hands frequently**.

Get familiar with your college's **student health services**. Find out who to call or where to go if you get sick. Of course, you are always welcome to call your **pediatrician** with any questions about your health.

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From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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