

Meningococcal Meningitis and Vaccination

What is meningococcal meningitis?

- Meningococcal meningitis is a rare but sometimes fatal disease that often strikes pre-adolescents, adolescents and young adults. The disease strikes quickly and has devastating complications, including hearing loss, brain damage, limb amputation and in some cases death.

Who is at risk for meningococcal meningitis?

- Adolescents and young adults are at increased risk for contracting meningococcal meningitis. In fact, adolescents and young adults account for nearly 30 percent of all cases of reported meningococcal infection in the U.S., and case fatality rates are up to five times higher among 15- to 24-year-olds compared with other age groups. Up to 83 percent of meningococcal disease cases among adolescents are vaccine-preventable.

Why are adolescents and young adults at risk for meningococcal meningitis?

- Lifestyle factors common among adolescents and young adults seem to be linked to meningococcal meningitis. These include:
 - Crowded living situations, such as dormitories, boarding schools and sleep-away camps
 - Move to a new residence or attendance at a new school or camp with students from geographically diverse areas
 - Active or passive smoking
 - Irregular sleep habits
 - Sharing items that touch a person's mouth, like utensils or lip balm

How is meningococcal meningitis spread?

- The disease is spread through the exchange of respiratory droplets, which includes sharing a drink or utensils, kissing or coughing and sneezing.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal meningitis?

- Meningococcal meningitis is often misdiagnosed as something less serious, as the symptoms often resemble the flu. Symptoms may include sudden high fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting and exhaustion. Some people also develop a rash after the disease has taken hold. Since symptoms progress quickly, it is very important that medical attention is sought immediately.

Can meningococcal meningitis be prevented? How can adolescents and young adults reduce their risk of getting meningococcal meningitis?

- Yes. Immunization can reduce one's risk against contracting four out of the five strains of the disease, which account for the majority of cases in adolescents and young adults.
- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved a meningococcal conjugate vaccine for use among 11- to 55-year-olds called Menactra, which is expected to provide longer duration of immunity. Before this new vaccine was approved, a polysaccharide vaccine called Menomune – that provides protection against four of the five disease strains for three to five years – had been quite effective in reducing rates of the disease among certain populations.
- Adolescents and young adults can reduce their risk by being vaccinated and by not sharing certain things, such as utensils and beverages. Additionally, they can maximize their body's own immune response by eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep and exercise, as well as avoiding cigarettes and alcohol use.

Are there government recommendations for meningococcal meningitis?

- The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), which advises the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on national vaccination policy, recommends that young adolescents at the pre-adolescent visit (11-12 year olds), adolescents at high school entry (15 year olds) and college freshmen living in dormitories should be immunized against meningococcal disease. All other adolescents who wish to decrease their risk of meningococcal disease may elect to receive the vaccine.

