

OVERVIEW OF MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

DISEASE INFORMATION

Meningococcal disease is an acute bacterial infection that strikes nearly 3,000 Americans each year. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the disease, accounting for nearly 30 percent of all cases in the U.S. A recent study found one in four adolescents infected will die, and those who survive, up to 20 percent will experience permanent disability.

Meningococcal disease, although rare, is devastating because early symptoms resemble the flu, making it difficult to recognize. However, unlike the flu, the disease can progress rapidly and within hours of initial symptoms, may cause hearing loss, brain damage, limb amputation and even death. Symptoms include high fever, headache, stiff neck, confusion, nausea, vomiting and exhaustion. In later stages, a rash may appear. Adolescents and young adults should seek medical attention immediately if they notice unusually sudden or severe symptoms of the disease.

The infection usually manifests itself as an inflammation of the membranes around the brain and spinal cord (*meningococcal meningitis*) or an infection of the blood (*meningococemia*), and they are caused by the same bacteria (*Neisseria meningitidis*).

Meningococcal bacteria are transmitted through the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and direct contact with the persons infected with the disease.

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE PREVENTIONS

In May 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued recommendations calling for routine vaccination with meningococcal conjugate vaccine for college freshmen living in dormitories. **College freshmen living in dormitories are at a higher risk for meningococcal disease compared to other people of the same age.** Additionally, CDC states all other adolescents and college students wishing to reduce their risk may elect to be immunized if they have not previously been vaccinated. The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American College Health Association also supports these recommendations.

The Meningococcal Meningitis Vaccine offers protection against certain strains of *Neisseria Meningitidis*. The meningitis vaccine, Menactra, has recently been approved for use among persons aged 11 to 55 years. Menomune is another meningitis vaccine that has been quite effective in reducing the rates of the disease among certain populations. Meningitis vaccines are available through your family physician or clinics.

Adolescents and young adults also should be aware of other ways to reduce their risk of contracting the disease, including not sharing beverages or utensils, and regular sleeping patterns.

The following are Web sites that provide more information about meningococcal disease and immunization:

- National Meningitis Association, www.nmaus.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov
- American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org
- American Academy of Family Physicians, www.aafp.org
- American College Health Association, www.acha.org
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, www.nfid.org