

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by a bacteria. It is a leading cause of bacterial meningitis in children 2-18 years of age in the United States. Meningitis is an infection of fluid surrounding the brain and the spinal cord. Meningococcal disease also causes blood infections.

Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious because early symptoms are similar to common viral illnesses. Symptoms of meningococcal disease may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, confusion, exhaustion, and/or a rash.

Meningococcal disease is spread through direct contact with respiratory and/or oral secretions from infected persons (for example, kissing or sharing drinking containers.) It can develop and spread quickly throughout the body, so early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Even with immediate treatment, the disease can kill an otherwise healthy young person within hours of first symptoms. Of those who survive, up to 20 percent may endure permanent disabilities, including brain damage, deaf-ness, and limb amputations.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than one year of age and people with certain medical conditions, such as lack of a spleen. College freshmen who live in dormitories have an increased risk of getting meningococcal disease.

A meningococcal vaccine is available for use among persons ages 11 to 55 years, which provides protection against four of the five types of bacteria that cause Meningococcal disease. Many parents are unaware of the dangers the disease poses to their children and that a vaccine is available that may help to prevent up to 83 percent of cases among teens and college students. Immunization is the most effective way to prevent this very serious disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other leading medical organizations recommend routine Meningococcal immunization for adolescents during the preadolescent doctor's visit (11- to 12-year-olds), adolescents at high school entry (15-year-olds), if they have not previously been immunized, and for college freshmen living in dormitories. It is suggested that you contact your child's health care provider to help you decide if your child should receive this vaccination.

For more information regarding this disease and the availability, effectiveness, and risks of vaccinations against the disease, please contact the school nurse at 608-786-0700, or visit the following websites: www.cdc.gov, www.musa.org, or www.nmaus.org.