

## MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE: INFORMATION SHEET

### **What is meningococcal disease? Why is it so dangerous?**

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Meningococcal disease includes two forms of bacterial infection, which may occur separately or together:

- **Meningitis:** tissues surrounding the spinal cord and the brain are infected, causing swelling and inflammation
- **Meningococemia:** bacteria enters the bloodstream and travels to many organs of the body.

Between 15% and 20% of people affected with this disease. Of those who survive, it is not uncommon to suffer from permanent damage, such as amputation of hands, feet, arms, or legs; brain damage; hearing loss; and seizures.

### **What are signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease?**

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The early symptoms can look no different from a cold or flu, and often are initially ignored. Some symptoms include headache, fever, stiff neck, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and sensitivity to light. A purplish red rash sometimes develops on the arms and legs, especially as the disease advances. The disease can progress very rapidly, and death can ensue within hours. Early diagnosis and treatment offer the best chance for recovery, but because early symptoms mimic less serious illnesses, it can be hard to make the diagnosis before the disease reaches an advanced stage.

### **Why should college students be concerned about meningococcal disease?**

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Over recent years, there has been an overall rise in the incidence of cases occurring in the **15-24 year old age group** and a statistically higher likelihood of contracting this illness among college students (particularly freshmen) living in dormitories. Between 1991 and 1997, the number of cases among teenagers and young adults doubled from 308 to 600. Alcohol and tobacco use may be related to the occurrence of these cases.

### **How can I reduce the risk of acquiring meningococcal disease?**

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A vaccine is now available which can help protect individuals from meningococcal disease, including meningitis. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) have recently modified their guidelines to recommend that parents and students be advised of the availability of this vaccine and encouraged to consider having students receive it.

This vaccine has been shown to be 85% effective in protecting individuals from 4 groups (or serotypes) of meningococcus. It does not confer protection against a fifth serotype of meningococcal that causes about a third of cases in this age group. Adverse reactions to the vaccine usually consist of mild and infrequent pain or redness at the injection site. Fever and hypersensitivity reactions can occur.

A single-dose vaccination produces protective antibody levels in 7 to 10 days. Immunization with the vaccine should be deferred during any acute illness. The vaccine should not be administered to pregnant women or individuals sensitive to thimerosal or any other components of this vaccine. The American College Health Association, a national non-profit organization serving and representing the interests of professionals and students in health and higher education, does not recommend the vaccine for adults over age 30, as they are rarely afflicted by this infection.

### **I still have questions. Who can I call?**

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You should first call your family health care provider to discuss your questions about the meningococcal vaccine. If you would like to talk to Student Health Services at Fishburn Road, please call (717) 531-5998.

For additional information please visit the following websites:

- **Housing and Food Services:** [www.hfs.psu.edu/vaccine](http://www.hfs.psu.edu/vaccine)
- **University Health Services:** [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)
- **American College Health Association:** [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)