



## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)**

### **What is meningococcal disease?**

Meningococcal disease, commonly known as meningococcal meningitis, is a potentially fatal bacterial infection that can cause severe swelling of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or a serious blood infection (meningococemia). The disease affects nearly 3,000 Americans annually. Approximately 10 percent of those who contract the disease will die. Of those who survive, nearly 20 percent suffer long-term disabilities, including brain damage, loss of hearing, organ failure and limb amputations.

### **Why are teenagers and college students at risk for meningococcal disease?**

Anyone can contract meningococcal disease. However, studies show that teenagers and college students may be at increased risk for contracting the disease. In fact, teenagers and college students account for nearly 30 percent of all cases of reported meningococcal infection in the U.S. The good news is that up to 83 percent of meningococcal disease cases among teenagers and college students may potentially be prevented through immunization.

Risk factors commonly associated with meningococcal disease include:

- Crowded living conditions (e.g., dormitories, sleep-away camps)
- Sharing beverages or utensils
- Active or passive smoking
- Irregular sleeping patterns

### **How does the disease spread?**

Meningococcal disease is spread through air droplets and by direct contact with secretions from infected persons (e.g., through coughing, kissing). Teenagers and college students can reduce the risk of transmitting the disease by not sharing personal items (e.g., utensils, water bottles, drinking glasses) and by being immunized.

### **What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?**

Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious, because early symptoms are similar to the flu and may include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, confusion, vomiting, exhaustion and/or a rash. Not all of these symptoms need to be present. Due to the commonality of these symptoms to less serious viral infections, disease prevention is critical.

Left untreated, meningococcal disease can progress rapidly, and often within hours of the first symptoms, can lead to serious complications, including brain damage, loss of hearing, organ failure and limb amputations.

### **How is meningococcal disease diagnosed? Is the disease treatable?**

Diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid, obtained by performing a spinal tap (a needle is inserted into the lower back, where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible). Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for selection of correct antibiotics.

Meningococcal disease is treated with antibiotics. Early treatment is essential to reduce the risk of death to less than 15 percent. However, because the disease spreads so quickly, early treatment does not guarantee a full recovery. That is why immunization is so important.

Antibiotics also should be given to those in close contact with a person who is diagnosed with meningitis.

### **Can meningococcal disease be prevented?**

Teenagers and college students can help reduce their risk of contracting meningococcal disease by being vaccinated. Immunization can help prevent up to 83 percent of cases among adolescents and young adults.

Teenagers and college students also can reduce the risk of transmitting the disease by not sharing personal items (e.g., utensils, water bottles, drinking glasses).

### **Does the government recommend immunization for meningococcal disease?**

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends routine meningococcal disease immunization at the preadolescent doctor's visit (11 to 12 years old). For those teenagers who have not been previously vaccinated, immunization also is recommended at high school entry and for all incoming college freshmen who live in dormitories (only one shot required). The CDC recommendations also state that all other teenagers and college students who wish to decrease their risk of meningococcal disease may elect to receive the vaccine.

Influential medical organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians and American College Health Association, also have issued meningococcal immunization recommendations targeting teenagers and college students.

### **Are there any side effects of the vaccine? Can you get meningitis from the vaccine?**

The meningococcal vaccine is safe and effective. As with all vaccines, there can be minor reactions, including pain and redness at the site of injection, lasting one to two days. You cannot get meningitis from the vaccine, because it is synthetic; there are no live bacteria in the vaccine.

### **Where can I find more information?**

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

- American Academy of Family Physicians, [www.aafp.org](http://www.aafp.org)
- American Academy of Pediatrics, [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- Meningitis Foundation of America, [www.musa.org](http://www.musa.org)
- National Association of School Nurses, [www.nasn.org](http://www.nasn.org)
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, [www.nfid.org](http://www.nfid.org)
- National Meningitis Association, [www.nmaus.org](http://www.nmaus.org)

For additional information about the disease and immunization, contact your school nurse or local public health department.