



Patient Information

Meningococcal Meningitis

Meningitis is caused by inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Of the two types of meningitis, viral and bacterial, viral meningitis is more common but less severe. Meningococcal meningitis — the focus of this handout — is a type of bacterial meningitis that is rare but can be deadly.

Between 1,400 and 2,800 U.S. residents get meningitis each year, and 10% to 15% of these cases result in death. Of the people with meningitis who live, 11% to 19% lose a limb, become deaf, have nervous system problems, become mentally retarded or suffer seizures or strokes.

Meningitis is a serious disease that strikes very quickly, but it can be prevented. Vaccines are available to protect against meningitis. Read on to learn how to identify meningitis and who should be immunized against the disease.

Who's at Risk?

Anyone can get meningitis, including infants. Meningococcal meningitis often strikes preadolescents, adolescents and young adults. In fact, adolescents and young adults account for nearly 30% of all meningitis cases. Death rates are up to five times higher among 15- to 24-year-olds compared with other age groups.

Lifestyle factors also seem to link the disease to adolescents and young adults, such as crowded living situations, going to bars, smoking and irregular sleep habits. College students who live in dormitories are at an increased risk of contracting meningitis compared with the general population of the same age.

Meningococcal meningitis is seasonal, with most cases occurring in late winter or early spring.

What Are the Symptoms?

Meningitis is frequently misdiagnosed because its symptoms are much like the symptoms of the flu or migraine. Symptoms of meningitis include sudden high fever, headache, stiff neck, confusion, nausea, vomiting, exhaustion and discomfort looking into bright lights. In some people, a rash may appear after the disease has taken hold. Other people may experience seizures.

Symptoms can progress very quickly. If any of these symptoms are present and are sudden and severe, don't wait. Seek medical help immediately.

How Is Meningitis Spread?

The disease is spread through the exchange of respiratory droplets with an infected person. Luckily, the bacteria that cause meningitis are not as common as illnesses like the common cold or flu, so meningitis cannot be spread simply by breathing the air where an infected person has been.

But coughing and sneezing can spread these droplets in the air to other people.

Sharing anything that touched the infected person's mouth — such as a cup, utensils, lip balm or cigarettes — is an exchange of respiratory droplets and should be avoided. Kissing an infected person also spreads the disease.

Who Should Be Immunized?

In January 2005, a new vaccine to protect against meningococcal meningitis, Menactra, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Menactra was licensed for use in people between the ages of 11 and 55.

The vaccine can prevent four types of meningitis, including the most common forms in the United States. Another vaccine, Menomune, has been available for more than 20 years and also protects against the same four types of meningitis. The difference is that Menactra protects against the disease for a longer period of time.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that the following adolescent groups be immunized against meningitis with Menactra:

- children at their preadolescent visit (11- to 12-year-olds)
- adolescents at high school entry (15-year-olds)
- college freshman living in dormitories
- any other adolescents who want to decrease their risk.

In addition, Menomune should be given to children 2 to 10 years old and adults older than 55 who are at risk for meningitis.

Some information adapted from The National Meningitis Association (www.nmaus.org) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov).

Additional Notes:
