

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE: PROTECT YOUR CHILD

Public health authorities recommend that teenagers and college-bound students be immunized against a potentially fatal bacterial infection called meningococcal disease, a type of meningitis. 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.

Meningococcal disease is a rare but potentially fatal bacterial infection that can cause severe swelling of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or a serious blood infection (meningococemia). Meningococcal disease strikes up to 3,000 Americans each year; nearly 30 percent of these cases are among teenagers and college students.

A meningococcal vaccine is available for use among persons aged 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

About meningococcal disease

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, deafness and limb amputations. Lifestyle factors common among teenagers and college students are believed to put them at increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease. These lifestyle factors include crowded living situations (for example, dormitories, and sleep-away camps), active or passive smoking and irregular sleeping habits. Teens should avoid sharing eating utensils and drinking out of the same container, since infections may spread through this type of close contact.

To learn more about meningococcal disease, vaccine information, and public health resources please contact the Polk county Health Department or your medical professional.