Meningococcal Meningitis & College Students

Meningococcal Disease is a serious bacterial infection that results in meningitis, nervous system injury, dysfunction of vital organs, severe disabilities, or death.

How is it spread? This and many other communicable diseases are spread by close contact with the respiratory and oral secretions of people who carry the bacterial organism in their bodies, sometimes without symptoms. Meningococcal infection can be transmitted via coughing, sneezing, kissing, and sharing beverages, food, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, etc.

Symptoms initially resemble the flu, but rapidly become severe and can include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, lethargy, weakness and confusion. People with these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.

Why special concerns for college students? Although meningococcal infection is not particularly common, the risk of getting this potentially fatal disease peaks during the teens & early twenties. Risk is magnified for those living in group settings - as most college students do. In addition, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has found that protective immunity from meningococcal vaccine decreases after 4-5 years. This can leave those who were vaccinated at an early adolescent age with insufficient protection during their college years.

What are the CDC recommendations for college students? The CDC calls for all individuals to get an initial dose of meningococcal vaccine at age 11 or 12, followed by a second dose at age 16 or soon thereafter. However, because of the increased risks described above, the CDC states that college students under age 22 who received all doses before age 16 get an additional (booster) dose of vaccine now. College students under 22 who have never been immunized against meningococcal disease should also get immunized now. Individuals of any age planning travel to risk locations or working in high risk settings who have never been immunized or who were immunized more than 4-5 years ago should also receive a dose of meningococcal vaccine.

Meningococcal Vaccine & Where to Get It: The meningococcal vaccine formulations licensed for use in the United States protect against four of the five most common strains of meningococcal bacteria. Immunity takes two weeks to develop and protection from an initial dose lasts 4-5 years. This vaccine is offered to SSU students by the Student Health Center (subject to availability). Students are charged only for the Health Center’s costs to purchase the vaccine. Uninsured students age 18 & under may be eligible for federally subsidized vaccine, which can result in further savings. Call the SHC @ 707 664-2921 for information or an appointment. Students may also seek immunization from a private health care provider or community clinic at their own expense.

Risk Reduction Strategies: Since no vaccine is 100% effective and some cases of meningococcal disease are caused by the B subtype of the bacteria (which the current U.S. licensed vaccine does not prevent) all individuals should reduce their risk of exposure to harmful infectious organisms by washing their hands regularly and avoiding oral contact with the food, drinks, eating utensils, etc. of others. They should also avoid circumstances that lower resistance to infection such as smoking, lack of rest, erratic diet, unwise use of alcohol and other drugs, etc. For more information, check the CDC website at http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/ .