

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ's)

What is meningococcal disease? Why is it so dangerous?

Meningococcal disease refers to two forms of bacterial infection:

- **Meningitis**, where bacteria attack the lining surrounding the spinal cord and the brain and cause swelling and inflammation, and
- **Meningococcemia**, where bacteria spread to the bloodstream and attack other parts of the body.

Meningococcal disease is an uncommon but very serious disease, and sometimes fatal. Despite treatment, 10-15% of people who get this disease die from it. Of those who survive, another 10-20% suffer long-term effects such as brain damage, hearing loss, seizures, and/or amputation of limbs.

What are the main symptoms of meningococcal disease?

The early symptoms can closely resemble the flu. These symptoms may develop over a period of 1 to 2 days, but sometimes the disease can cause death in a matter of hours. Common symptoms include headache, fever, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, confusion, sleepiness, and sensitivity to light. A purplish red rash, mainly on the arms and legs, sometimes develops, especially as the disease advances. Although the best chance for survival is early diagnosis and treatment, it can be hard to make the diagnosis before the illness is more advanced.

Meningococcal disease occurs more often in the winter and early spring.

Why should college students be concerned about meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal meningitis is increasing among college-aged students. The number of cases among the 15-to-24-year-old age group doubled between 1991 and 1997, from 308 to 600 cases per year. College freshmen living in residence halls are up to 4 times more likely to develop this illness than the general population. Investigations of previous college outbreaks suggest that lifestyle behaviors among college students—such as close living quarters, active and passive smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and bar patronage—may be related to the occurrence of these cases. Kissing, sharing eating utensils, and exposure to saliva secretions of a person with meningococcal disease increase the risk of contracting the disease.

Can meningococcal disease be prevented?

Both the Menomune and Menactra vaccines can help protect individuals from meningococcal disease, including meningitis. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the American College Health Association (ACHA), and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend that parents and students should be advised of the availability of this vaccine and that students should be encouraged to consider receiving it.

This vaccine has been shown to be about 85% effective in protecting individuals from 4 of the 5 most common strains of the bacteria. Vaccine protection lasts at least 3 years and can prevent 50-70% of cases on college campuses. Adverse reactions, which are mild and infrequent, usually consist of pain or redness at the injection site. Fever and hypersensitivity (allergic) reactions can occur.

I still have questions. Where can I get more information?

- Your family doctor can give you more information about the meningococcal vaccine.
- Internet:
 - **Centers for Disease Control** www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm
 - **Meningitis Foundation of America** www.musa.org
 - **American College Health Association** www.acha.org/projects_programs/men.cfm
- If you have additional questions, please call **Harcum College Student Health Services** at (610-526-6090, and ask to speak the nurse.