

# meningococcal disease— information for teens and college students



**Certain teens and college students** have a higher risk of getting meningococcal disease, and it can be deadly. **Read on** to learn more about this serious illness and **how to protect** yourself.

## What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by bacteria. Many people carry meningococcal bacteria in their throats but never get the disease. However, in a few people it can lead to 2 common forms of the disease: *meningococemia* and *meningitis*. Meningococcal disease can affect the blood (meningococemia) and/or brain and spinal cord (meningitis). It can be **life-threatening** unless diagnosed and treated early.

Each year in the United States about 2,500 people get meningococcal disease. While it can strike anybody, the **greatest risk** in teens occurs between 15 and 18 years of age. Also, students entering college and planning to live in dorms are at a higher risk than other people of the same age. **It's easy for infections to spread in crowded dorms** or in enclosed areas where students often meet to smoke and drink alcohol.

## Symptoms and Signs

The symptoms and signs of meningococcal disease often are mistaken for other less serious illnesses like the flu. **Common symptoms** include

- High **fever** (over 101.4°F)
- A flat, pink to red to purple **rash** mainly on the lower arms and legs, including the hands and feet, with small bruises or bleeding under the skin
- **Nausea**
- **Vomiting**
- Generalized muscle **aches**
- Sudden, severe **headache**
- **Confusion**
- **Sensitivity** to light
- **Stiff neck** along with headache and sensitivity to light (can signal the meningitis form of the illness and should never be ignored)

It's **important to get medical treatment right away**. Meningococemia or meningitis can **get worse very quickly**, even within a few hours from the start of symptoms. If untreated, the disease can be fatal (up to 20% of teens die) or cause kidney failure, hearing loss, limb amputation, or lifelong problems with the nervous system.

## Treatment

Meningococcal disease is treated with **antibiotics**. When given shortly after the start of symptoms, these antibiotics may prevent the disease from getting worse.

Because this infection spreads to others very easily, anyone with several hours of close contact with a person with meningococcal disease should contact their physician and also should be given an antibiotic to help prevent meningococcal disease. Ideally, this antibiotic should be given within 24 hours of the diagnosis of meningococcal disease.

## Vaccination

The best protection from meningococcal disease for certain teens and college students who will be living in dorms is to be vaccinated. Safe and effective **vaccines are available** to prevent meningococcal disease caused by 3 of the 4 most common types of meningococcal bacteria found in teens. However, the vaccination provides protection against only about two thirds of the cases of meningococcal infections. Although mild side effects, like redness and swelling at the injection site or a slight fever, can occur from the vaccination, these are considered uncommon and usually go away on their own in a few days. Serious allergic reactions to the vaccine are **extremely rare**.

## Who should be vaccinated?

- **11- to 12-year-olds** at their annual visit to the pediatrician
- Students entering **high school or 15-year-olds** (whichever comes first)
- Students about to start college and planning to **live in a dorm**

Students who already received a meningococcal vaccine in the last 3 years don't need to be vaccinated, but they should check with their pediatrician to be sure.

## Take care of yourself

If you are 11 to 12 years old, it's important that you **see your pediatrician for your annual checkup**. You may need a booster of vaccines besides the one against meningococcal disease (such as the vaccines that prevent tetanus and diphtheria). At the same visit your pediatrician can give you advice about keeping healthy.

If you are a student about to start college, here are some health tips

- Reduce your risk of getting meningitis by **staying away from smoking, drinking alcohol, excessive stress, and exposure to upper respiratory infections**.
- **Strengthen your immune system** by living a healthy lifestyle that includes enough sleep, exercise, and a balanced diet.

- **Avoid sharing** eating utensils or drinking glasses, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, and wash your hands often.
- Get familiar with your college's **student health services**. Find out who to call or where to go if you get sick.
- Remember that **your pediatrician** is available to answer any questions you may have about your health.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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From your doctor

