Meningococcal Fact Sheet

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a rare, but potentially fatal bacterial infection. The disease occurs as either meningococcal meningitis, an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord or meningococcemia, the presence of bacteria in the blood.

Rates of meningococcal disease have been declining in the United States since the late 1990s. There are now fewer than 1,000 cases reported each year. Meningococcal disease is also seasonal: the number of cases generally peaks each year in December and January.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but rates of disease are highest in children younger than 1 year of age, followed by a second peak in adolescence typically around 16 years of age (see graph below). Meningococcal disease strikes about 2800 Americans each year, or about 1/100,000 persons each year, and is responsible for about 300 deaths annually. Rates of meningococcal disease are highest among infants, but in the past decade, rates among 11-22 year olds have increased. It is estimated that 100-125 cases of meningococcal disease occur annually on college campuses and 5-15 students die each year as a result. Survivors may suffer brain damage, hearing loss, kidney failure or loss of limbs.

Risk for College Students

College students, in general, are at no greater risk of contracting meningococcal disease than the population of 18-22 year old as a whole, but studies have shown freshmen living in residence halls have a six times higher risk of meningococcal disease than college students overall. Students 25 years of age of older have a low risk of disease.

Meningococcal disease is transmitted though the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and by direct contact with an infected person. Direct contact is defined as oral contact with shared items such as cigarettes or drinking glasses or through intimate contact such as kissing. Many people carry the bacteria in their throats. But almost all of them build up a natural immunity before developing any illness.

Symptoms of the Disease

The early symptoms mimic the flu, including fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash and lethargy. The disease often progresses rapidly.

Vaccination Recommendations for College Students

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all incoming undergraduate students living in residence halls receive meningitis immunization.

About the Vaccine (Menactra)

The vaccine (Menactra) provides excellent protection against the strains that cause 70-80% of infections in college students. Development of immunity requires seven to ten days. Protection lasts eight or more years. The vaccine is very safe and adverse reactions are mild and infrequent, consisting primarily of redness and pain at the site of injection lasting up to two days, and mild headache.

For More Information

www.cdc.gov
www.acha.org
http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/surveillance/