



# MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE

## *What college students need to know*

### *Q. What is meningococcal disease?*

**A.** Meningococcal disease is a potentially life-threatening bacterial infection caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*, a common bacterium. Sometimes these bacteria invade the body to infect the lining of the brain (causing meningitis) or the bloodstream (meningococemia). This invasive disease is sometimes fatal unless recognized and treated promptly. Brain damage, hearing loss, loss of limbs, or kidney failure can also occur. Meningococcal disease is relatively rare, occurring at a rate of less than one in 100,000 people in the United States.

### *Q. Who is at risk for meningococcal disease?*

**A.** Everyone is potentially at risk, but college freshmen living in dormitories have an increased risk of developing meningococcal disease compared with other college students. For this reason, it is important for students to become familiar with meningococcal disease and get vaccinated against it before they come to college.

### *Q. How is meningococcal disease spread?*

**A.** Many people carry the bacteria in their throat or nose in a harmless state without developing an illness. Meningococcal bacteria are spread by direct contact with an infected person's oral or nasal secretions (for example, saliva or droplets from sneezing). The infection is not spread through the air, in food or water, or by casual contact in classrooms, restaurants, bars, or other social settings.

### *Q. What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?*

**A.** Meningococcal disease can cause an individual to become very ill, very quickly. The most common symptoms include high fever (>101°F) accompanied by severe headache, neck stiffness, and confusion. Vomiting or rashes may also occur. Anyone with these symptoms should contact a health care provider or go to an emergency room immediately. If not treated immediately, the disease can progress rapidly and can lead to shock and death within a few hours.

### *Q. How can meningococcal disease be prevented?*

**A.** Vaccines are available that offer protection against some, but not all, strains of the bacteria. Immunization will reduce the overall risk of developing invasive meningococcal disease by about 65 percent.

### *Q. Who should get vaccinated?*

**A.** Meningococcal vaccine (MEN ACWY-D, Menactra) is recommended for all adolescents ages 11–16 years of age. It is also recommended for first-year college students living in a residence hall, if they have not been previously immunized. Other college students age 21 and under who want to reduce their risk of meningococcal disease may also get the vaccine.

New recommendations about booster doses were issued in 2010. If you received meningococcal vaccine before age 16, you should get a booster dose before you start college. UHS recommends that all current students age 21 and under get a booster dose of meningococcal vaccine if their first dose was given before age 16. If a vaccine was given at age 16 or later, no booster is required.

In addition, the meningococcal vaccine is recommended for persons traveling to countries where meningococcal disease is more common. Persons who have had their spleen removed or who have complement deficiency (an immune disorder), sickle cell disease or HIV should get booster doses of the vaccine every five years.

### *Q. What are the benefits and limitations of the vaccine?*

**A.** The current recommended meningococcal vaccine is about 90 percent effective in preventing meningococcal disease caused by four strains of the bacteria (serogroups A, C, Y, and W). A separate vaccine is also available that prevents disease caused by a fifth strain (serogroup B) and UHS strongly recommends that each student speak with their health care provider regarding the risks and benefits of obtaining this vaccination. These vaccines do not provide any protection against other types of bacterial or viral meningitis. Immunized students must be aware that they can still develop meningococcal disease, as the vaccine provides only short term protection.

### *Q. When and where can I get vaccinated?*

**A.** New students should get the vaccine before arriving on campus in the fall. The vaccine is available from your family health care provider and is also available at UHS for a fee. Students can call 608.265.5600 to schedule an appointment to receive the vaccine.

### *Q. Where can I find more information?*

**A.** Additional information about meningococcal disease and the vaccine is available on our website [uhs.wisc.edu](http://uhs.wisc.edu).

*To comply with Wisconsin law [SS 36.25(46)], students who live in a residence hall must report whether or not they have received vaccinations against meningococcal disease and hepatitis B. You can fulfill this requirement by completing your online immunization and Health History Form at MyUHS. To sign up for your account, go to [uhs.wisc.edu](https://uhs.wisc.edu) and click on MyUHS.*

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