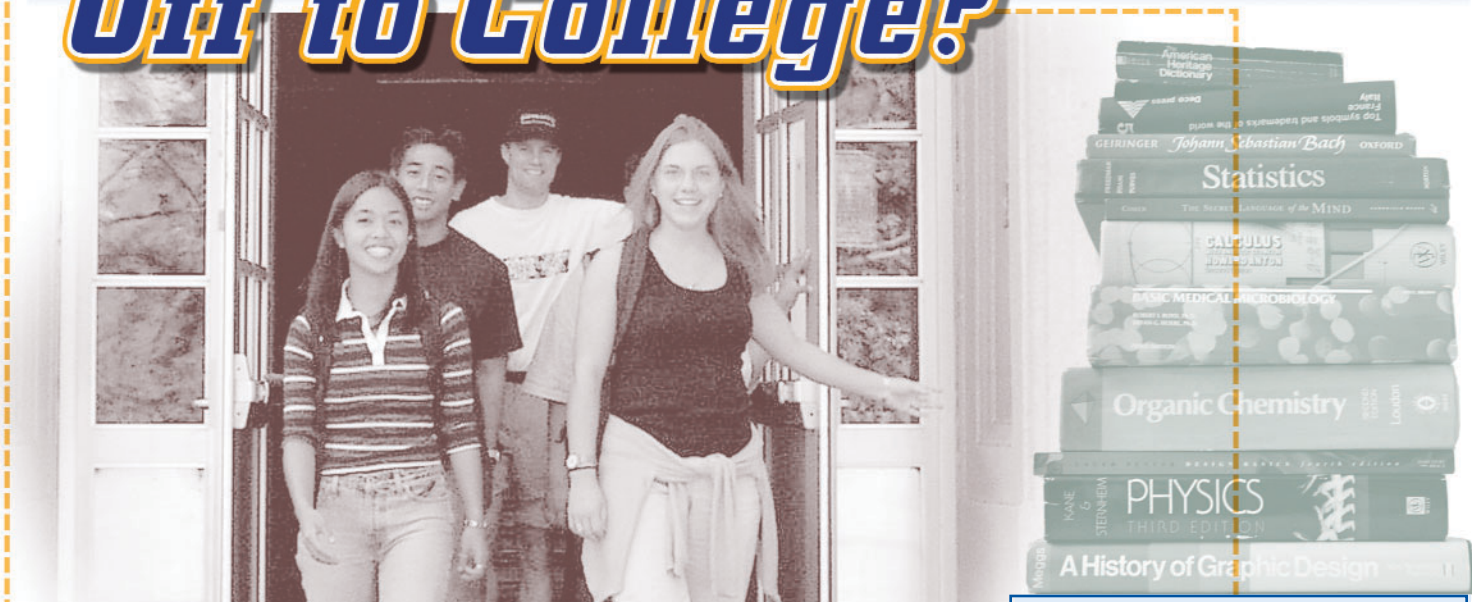
Off to College?



Do you know about meningococcal disease?

- Meningococcal disease is a **serious** illness caused by bacteria that infect the blood or membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It can lead to brain damage, disability, and death.
- It is most common in infants and in people with certain medical conditions. College **freshmen**, particularly those who live in **dorms**, have a modestly increased risk of getting the disease. About 100 cases occur on college campuses in the U.S. each year, with 5-15 deaths.
- Common **symptoms** of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, sensitivity to light, sleepiness, confusion, and seizures.
- It can be treated with antibiotics, but **treatment** must be started early. Despite treatment, 10-15% of people who get the disease die from it. Another 10-20% suffer long-term consequences.
- A meningococcal **vaccine** is available from your doctor or college health service. It protects against four of the five most common types of this disease. Vaccine protection lasts 3-5 years and can prevent 50%-70% of cases on college campuses.
- Meningococcal vaccine may cause **reactions** such as pain or fever. Discuss contraindications and rare but serious side effects with your health care provider.

Before you start college, make sure you are up-to-date on all your immunizations: measles, mumps, rubella; tetanus, diphtheria; varicella; and hepatitis B.

Colleges and universities may require them for admission.

For more information check:

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm

www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/VIS/default.htm

www.acha.org/info_resources

Ask your health care provider or student health service!

It is important to keep a record of all your Immunizations throughout life. If you do not have a Lifetime Immunization Record, Please order one free, from

immunematerials@doh.wa.gov

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Washington State Department of Health

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Meningococcal Disease

What Is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria. The two most common forms of meningococcal disease are meningitis, a bacterial infection of the fluid and covering of the spinal cord and brain; or septicemia, an infection of the bloodstream. Meningitis has other causes as well, the most common being viral infection.

How Common Is Meningococcal Disease?

Meningococcal disease is uncommon. In the US, each year there are about 2500 cases (1-2 cases for every 100,000 people), with 71 cases occurring in Washington State in 2000. Of 14 million students enrolled in colleges nationwide, approximately 100 acquire meningococcal disease each year.

How Is It Diagnosed?

A diagnosis is commonly made by growing the bacteria from the spinal fluid or blood. Identifying the bacteria is important for selecting the best antibiotics.

Are College Students At Increased Risk?

Overall, undergraduate students have lower risk than a non-student population (1.4 cases per 100,000 people per year). However, college freshmen living in dormitories have a modestly increased rate (4.6 cases per 100,000 people per year). Reasons for this increase are not fully understood, but are probably related to living in close proximity to each other.

How Are Meningococcal Bacteria Spread?

The bacteria are transmitted from person-to-person in secretions from the nose and throat. They are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near an infected person, but require close contact. The bacteria can live outside the body for only a few minutes; so if the germs contaminate a desk or book, they soon die and won't infect a person who touches it later.

As many as 2 in 10 people carry the bacteria in the back of the nose and throat at any given time, especially in winter. Why only a very small number of those who have the bacteria in their nose and throat develop disease, while others remain healthy, is not understood.

How Can I Avoid Getting Meningococcal Disease?

You can protect yourself by maintaining good health and hygiene. As a general recommendation, you should wash your hands frequently. Avoid sharing materials that make mouth contact, such as eating utensils, bottles, cigarettes, or lip balm. Contact a healthcare provider immediately if you are in close contact with someone who is known or suspected to have meningococcal infection.

Is The Vaccine Recommended For College Students?

Currently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Pediatrics do not recommend routine meningococcal vaccination for college students (even in dormitories). Meningococcal vaccination is recommended for persons at above-average risk for meningococcal disease, including persons with certain immune system problems, those lacking a spleen, and travelers to countries where meningococcal disease is common. It should be considered for college freshmen who will live in dormitories. The vaccine is comprised of 4 strains of the bacteria, but does not include type B and other strains that account for nearly 42% of meningococcal cases in Washington State in 2000. Protection lasts 3-5 years; boosters may not be as effective as the primary vaccination. Discuss the risks and benefits of vaccination with your health care provider.