

Meningococcal Disease

Meningococcal disease is a rare but potentially fatal bacterial infection that can cause severe swelling of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or a serious blood infection (meningococemia). Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious because early symptoms are similar to common viral illnesses. Symptoms may include: high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, vomiting, sensitivity to light, nausea, confusion, rash and fatigue. Symptoms may develop rapidly or over several days. The disease can be fatal in as little as a few hours. Of those that survive 20 percent will have permanent disabilities, including brain damage, loss of limbs, and deafness. Meningococcal disease is spread through direct contact with respiratory and/or oral secretions from infected persons. Increased risk of exposure is caused by activities such as kissing, sharing drinks, or living in the same house as a sick person.

Teenagers and college students are at increased risk because of their lifestyle, and account for nearly 30 percent of the 3,000 cases in the United States each year. Up to 83 percent of the cases among teens and college students may potentially be prevented by immunization, the most effective way to prevent the disease. The CDC and other leading health organizations recommends that all 11-12 year olds should be vaccinated with meningococcal conjugate vaccine. A booster shot is recommended at age 16 to continue to protect through the teen aged years. If a teenager has missed getting the vaccine, the parents should ask their healthcare provider about getting it now.

Keeping up to date on the meningococcal vaccine is the best way to prevent illness. Students should also get plenty of rest, eat a healthy diet, and avoid sharing drinks.