

## **Frequently Asked Questions and Answers About Meningococcal Meningitis**

### **What is meningococcal meningitis?**

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

### **What causes meningococcal meningitis?**

Meningococcal meningitis is caused by the bacterium *Neisseria meningitidis*, a leading cause of meningitis and septicemia (or blood poisoning) in teenagers and young adults in the United States. Meningitis and septicemia are the most common manifestations of the disease, although they have been expressed as septic arthritis, pneumonia, brain inflammation and other syndromes.

### **How many people contract meningococcal meningitis each year? How many people die as a result?**

Meningococcal meningitis strikes about 3,000 Americans each year and is responsible for approximately 300 deaths annually. It is estimated that 100 to 125 cases of meningococcal disease occur annually on college campuses and 5 to 15 students die as a result.

### **How is meningococcal meningitis spread?**

Many people in a population can be a carrier of meningococcal bacteria (up to 11 percent) and usually nothing happens to a person other than acquiring natural antibodies. Meningococcal bacteria are transmitted through the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and by direct contact with an infected person. Direct contact, for these purposes, is defined as oral contact with shared items, such as cigarettes or drinking glasses, or through intimate contact such as kissing.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The early symptoms usually associated with meningococcal meningitis include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting and lethargy, and may resemble the flu. Because the disease progresses rapidly, often in as little as 12 hours, prompt diagnosis and treatment are important to assuring recovery. Symptoms may appear 2 to 10 days after exposure, but usually within 5 days.

### **Who is at risk?**

Recent evidence indicates that college students residing on campus in residence halls appear to be at a higher risk for meningococcal meningitis than college students overall. Further research recently released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows freshmen living in dormitories have a six-fold increased risk for meningococcal meningitis than college students overall.

Although anyone can be a carrier of the bacteria that causes meningococcal meningitis, data indicate that certain social behaviors, such as exposure to passive and active smoking, bar patronage and excessive alcohol consumption, may put college students at increased risk for the disease. Patients with respiratory infections, compromised immunity, those in close contact to a known case and travelers to endemic areas of the world are also at increased risk. Cases and outbreaks usually occur in the late winter and early spring when school is in session.

### **Does the CDC recommend vaccination for college students?**

On October 20, 1999, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) voted to recommend that college students, particularly freshmen living in dormitories, be educated about meningococcal meningitis and the potential benefits of vaccination. ACIP further recommends that

immunizations should be provided or made easily available to those freshmen who wish to reduce their risk for meningococcal meningitis. Other undergraduate students wishing to reduce their risk for meningococcal meningitis can also choose to be vaccinated.

### **Why should college students consider vaccination with the meningococcal vaccine?**

Data from the CDC demonstrate that sub-populations of college students are at increased risk for meningococcal meningitis. Pre-exposure vaccination enhances immunity to four strains of meningococcus that cause 65 to 75 percent of invasive disease and therefore reduces a student's risk for disease. Development of immunity after vaccination requires 7 to 10 days.

### **Who should consider being vaccinated?**

- First-year college students, particularly those living in residence halls, who elect to decrease their risk for meningococcal meningitis
- Undergraduate students 25 years of age or younger who request vaccination in order to decrease their risk for disease and are not pregnant
- Students with medical conditions that compromise immunity (e.g., HIV, absent spleen, antibody deficiency)

### **How effective is the vaccine?**

The meningococcal vaccine has been shown to provide protection against the most common strains of the disease, including serogroups A, C, Y and W-135. These strains account for about 70% of the disease in the United States. The vaccine is 85 to 100 percent effective in serogroups A and C in older children and adults.

### **Is the vaccine safe? Are there adverse effects to the vaccine?**

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.

### **What is the duration of protection?**

The duration of the meningococcal vaccine's efficacy is approximately three to five years. As with any vaccine, vaccination against meningitis may not protect 100 percent of all susceptible individuals.

### **Does the Skidmore College Health Service offer the meningitis vaccine on campus?**

The Skidmore College Health Service offers the meningococcal vaccine for those students who wish to reduce their risk for disease.

### **What is the cost of the meningococcal vaccine?**

The current cost of the meningococcal vaccine is \$70.00, but is subject to change. Payment can be made in cash or may be charged to the student's account or Skidmore debit card.

### **Who can students and parents contact for additional information on meningococcal meningitis and the vaccine?**

For additional information on meningococcal meningitis and the vaccine, parents and students can call Skidmore College Health Services at (518) 580-5550, or email [health@skidmore.edu](mailto:health@skidmore.edu). Information about the disease and vaccine can also be found by visiting the websites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo), the New York State Department of Health, [www.health.state.ny.us](http://www.health.state.ny.us), or the American College Health Association, [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org).