

## Meningococcal Disease and Students: Commonly Asked Questions

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### **What is meningococcal disease?**

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. These bacteria can infect the tissue (the “meninges”) that surrounds the brain and spinal cord and cause meningitis, or they may infect the blood or other organs of the body. In the US, about 1,000-3,000 people get meningococcal disease each year and 10-15% die despite receiving antibiotic treatment. Of those who survive, about 11-19% may lose limbs, become deaf, have problems with their nervous system, become mentally retarded, or have seizures or strokes.

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

These bacteria are passed from person-to-person through saliva (spit). You must be in close contact with an infected person’s saliva in order for the bacteria to spread. Close contact includes activities such as kissing, sharing water bottles, sharing eating/drinking utensils or sharing cigarettes with someone who is infected; or being within 3-6 feet of someone who is infected and is coughing or sneezing.

### **Who is at most risk for getting meningococcal disease?**

People who travel to certain parts of the world where the disease is very common are at risk for meningococcal disease. Children and adults with damaged or removed spleens or terminal complement component deficiency (an inherited immune disorder) are at risk. People who live in certain settings such as college freshmen living in dormitories and military recruits are at greater risk of disease.

### **Are students at increased risk for meningococcal disease?**

The risk of meningococcal disease starts to increase in adolescence and young adulthood. In this age group, the highest rates of disease are in those 15-24 years of age.

### **Is there a vaccine against meningococcal disease?**

There are currently 2 vaccines available in the US that protect against 4 of the most common of the 13 serogroups (subgroups) of *N. meningitidis* that cause serious disease. Protection with the meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine lasts about 3 to 5 years. The meningococcal conjugate vaccine is expected to help decrease disease transmission and to provide more long-term protection.

### **Should my child receive meningococcal vaccine?**

Meningococcal vaccine is now recommended routinely for children 11-12 years of age and for 13-18 year-olds, college freshman and other newly enrolled college students living in dormitories who are not yet vaccinated. Other high risk groups include anyone with a damaged spleen or whose spleen has been removed, those traveling to countries where meningococcal disease is very common and people who may have been exposed to meningococcal disease during an outbreak. Children and adults with terminal complement component deficiency (an inherited immune disorder) should also receive the vaccine. Parents of children in these groups should discuss vaccination with their child’s healthcare provider.

Massachusetts law now requires newly enrolled full-time students attending colleges and schools with grades 9-12, who will be living in a dormitory or other congregate housing, licensed or approved by the school or college, to receive meningococcal vaccine or sign a waiver declining vaccination. More information about this requirement may be found in the MDPH document entitled “*Information about Meningococcal Disease and Vaccination and Waiver for Students at Residential Schools and Colleges.*”

Note: There is currently an ongoing national shortage of meningococcal vaccine. Students not able to get vaccinated because of the shortage can indicate this on the waiver form and will be allowed to attend school.

### **How can I protect my child from getting meningococcal disease?**

The best protection against meningococcal disease and many other infectious diseases is thorough and frequent handwashing, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette. Individuals should:

1. wash their hands often, especially after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food (hands should be washed with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand gel or rub may be used if hands are not visibly dirty);
2. cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue in a trash can; or if they don’t have a tissue, cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve.
3. not share food, drinks or eating utensils with other people, especially if they are ill.

You can obtain more information about meningococcal disease or vaccination from your healthcare provider, your local board of health (listed in the phone book under government), or the MDPH Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>.

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