Meningitis

For more information about meningitis and the vaccine, contact your personal health care provider. Visit the websites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov and The American College Health Association, www.acha.org.

What is Meningitis?

Meningitis is a rare but potentially fatal bacterial infection. The disease is commonly 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 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 is Meningitis Spread?

Meningococcal bacteria are transmitted through the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and by direct, prolonged or intimate contact with an infected person.

Who is at Risk?

College students living on campus in dormitories appear to be at a higher risk than college students overall. Certain social behaviors, such as smoking or exposure to smoke and excessive alcohol consumption increase the risk. Individuals with respiratory infections and compromised immune systems are also at increased risk.

What are the Symptoms?

Fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, sleepiness, confusion, lethargy, sensitivity to light. If you experience two or more of these symptoms at the same time, seek medical care immediately. Early diagnosis and treatment are extremely important. The disease progresses rapidly, often in as little as 12 hours. Because meningitis usually peaks in late winter and early spring, symptoms can easily be mistaken for the flu.

How is Meningitis Diagnosed?

Growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid usually makes the diagnosis. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible. Identification of the type of bacteria is important for selection of correct antibiotics.

Is there a Vaccine?

There are vaccines against Hib, against some serogroups of N. meningitidis and many types of Streptococcus pneumoniae. The vaccines against Hib are very safe and highly effective. There are two vaccines against N. meningitidis available in the U.S. Meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPSV4 or Menomune®) has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and available since 1981. Meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV4 or MenactraT) was licensed in 2005. Both vaccines can prevent 4 types of meningococcal disease, including 2 of the 3 types most common in the U.S. (serogroup C, Y, and W-135) and a type that causes epidemics in Africa (serogroup A). Meningococcal vaccines cannot prevent all types of the disease. But they do protect many people who might become sick if they didn't get the vaccine The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that undergraduate college students, particularly freshmen who live in or plan to live in dormitories or resident halls, consider getting the MCV4 vaccine.

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