

Minnesota Department of Health

# Meningococcal Disease and the Vaccine: What College Students Need to Know

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria. It can cause meningitis, an infection of the brain and spinal cord coverings, and blood infections. Drugs such as penicillin can be used to treat these infections.

About 2,600 people get meningococcal disease each year in the U.S. About 10-15 percent of these people die. Of those who recover, 10 percent experience serious long-term effects such as hearing loss, diminished mental capacity, loss of fingers or toes, seizures and other nervous system problems.

How does meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread by close or direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat. Kissing, sharing silverware, drinking directly from the same container, sharing a cigarette or lipstick, and coughing are examples of how meningococcal disease spreads.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms of meningococcal meningitis, a form of meningococcal disease, can include a high fever, headache, a very stiff neck, confusion, nausea, sensitivity to light, vomiting, and exhaustion. A rash may also develop.

You may become seriously ill very quickly, so contact your student health service or healthcare provider immediately if you have two or more of these symptoms.

How can I protect myself from getting meningococcal disease?

Wash your hands often and avoid sharing forks, spoons, drinking containers, lipstick and smoking materials. There is also a vaccine that can prevent meningococcal disease.

**Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but college freshmen living in dorms are at increased risk and should seriously consider getting immunized.**



Immunization Program  
P.O. Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-35503 or 1-800-657-3970  
[www.health.state.mn.us/immunize](http://www.health.state.mn.us/immunize)

What should I know about the meningococcal vaccine?

The vaccine is highly effective (85-100 percent) at preventing four of the major strains of bacteria that cause meningococcal meningitis on college campuses. There is one other strain that circulates that is not included in the vaccine.

For most college students, only one dose of the vaccine is needed. The vaccine protects for about three to five years. Immunity develops within seven to ten days after vaccination.

A vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. The risk of the meningococcal vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small. **Getting the meningococcal vaccine is much safer than getting the disease.**

How can I learn more about meningococcal disease and the meningococcal vaccine?

Ask your student health service or your healthcare provider.

Call your local health department's immunization program or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): 1-800-232-4636 (1-800-CDC-INFO).

Visit the following sites:

- Minnesota Department of Health  
[www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/meningococcal/index.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/meningococcal/index.html)
- Immunization Action Coalition  
[www.immunize.org/vis/vis\\_menin.asp](http://www.immunize.org/vis/vis_menin.asp)
- National Center for Infectious Disease  
[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal\\_g.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm)
- American College Health Association  
[www.acha.org/projects\\_programs/meningitis/index.cfm](http://www.acha.org/projects_programs/meningitis/index.cfm)
- National Meningitis Association  
[www.nmaus.org](http://www.nmaus.org)