

Meningitis Immunization Information for Parents

Meningococcal disease, commonly known as meningitis, is a potentially fatal bacterial infection that can strike teenagers and college students. The disease can come on quickly and may cause death or permanent disability within hours of the first symptoms. Meningitis is very rare, but may be prevented through vaccination.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends routine meningococcal disease immunization at the preadolescent doctor's visit (11 to 12 years old). For those teenagers who have not been previously vaccinated, immunization is recommended for high school students and for all incoming college freshmen.

Teenagers and college students have an increased rate of meningococcal infection compared to the general population, accounting for nearly 30 percent of all U.S. cases annually. Of those who survive, up to 20 percent suffer long-term disabilities, including brain damage, loss of hearing, organ failure and limb amputations.

Meningococcal disease can be misdiagnosed as something less serious, because early symptoms are similar to those of influenza or other common viral illnesses, including high fever, headache, nausea and stiff neck. That is why immunization is so important. A conjugate meningococcal vaccine is now available which public health officials anticipate will provide longer protection against four of the five strains of bacteria that cause meningococcal disease. Although teenagers and college students are at increased risk for contracting the disease, up to 83 percent of cases in that population may be prevented through immunization.

The Meningitis Vaccine is safe; however, there are risks with any vaccine. About half of the people who get the vaccine will have pain and redness where the shot was given, but because the vaccine is not made from the whole bacteria, it cannot cause bloodstream infections or meningitis. A small percentage of people who get the vaccine develop a fever. Vaccines, like all medicines, carry a risk of an allergic reaction, but this risk is very small.

Contact your health care provider or the Cleveland County Health Department. The health department has the vaccine available at no charge for all students who: have no health insurance; are Medicaid eligible; are Native American; or whose health insurance does not pay for vaccines.

This vaccine is not required to attend public school in Oklahoma, but may be required by colleges and universities. For more information contact your healthcare provider or the Cleveland County Health Department or visit the CDC Web site at www.cdc.gov.