

Protecting Yourself From Meningitis

In June of 2002, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania passed Senate Bill 955, which mandates that all colleges and universities adopt meningitis vaccination policies for students living in campus housing. The legislation provides that if a student is not vaccinated for meningitis, the student must sign a waiver stating that he or she has received information from the school regarding the benefits of the immunization.

Should you choose to get the vaccination as recommended, you can arrange with your health care provider to do so or elect to receive the vaccine on campus when you join W&J in the fall.

Why is this vaccine particularly recommended for college students?

College students, particularly freshmen living in residence halls, are at increased risk for meningococcal disease, a potentially fatal bacterial infection commonly referred to as meningitis. Students seem to be more susceptible because they live and work in close proximity to each other. Behavioral and social aspects of college life appear to be risk factors—late night studying can wear down one's resistance. Late nights socializing can increase your exposure to other risk factors, such as second-hand smoke, excessive alcohol consumption, and other risks. Studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1998) showed that freshmen students residing in residence halls are at a higher risk for contracting meningitis.

The American College Health Associate, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommend that college students learn more about meningitis and the protection afforded by the vaccine. At least 70 percent of all cases of meningococcal disease in college students are preventable by getting the vaccine.

What is meningitis?

Meningococcal meningitis is a rare but serious disease. When it strikes, this potentially fatal bacterial disease can lead to swelling of fluid surrounding the brain and spinal column as well as severe and permanent disabilities, such as hearing loss, brain damage, seizures, limb amputation, and even death.

How is it spread?

Meningococcal meningitis is spread through air via respiratory secretions or through close contact with an infected person. This can include coughing, sneezing, kissing, or sharing items like eating utensils, cigarettes, and drinking glasses.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of meningitis often resemble the flu and can include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, lethargy, and confusion.

How common is it?

Meningitis strikes about 3,000 Americans each year and is responsible for about 300 deaths annually. About 100 to 125 cases of meningococcal disease occur annually on college campuses, resulting in death for about 5 to 15 students per year.

Can meningitis be prevented?

Yes. A safe and effective vaccine is available to protect against four of the five most common strains of the disease. The vaccine provides protection for approximately three to five years. Adverse reactions to the meningitis vaccine are mild and infrequent, consisting primarily of redness and pain at the injection site, and, rarely, a fever. As with any vaccine, vaccination against meningitis may not protect 100 percent of susceptible individuals. It does not prevent viral meningitis, the form caused by a virus rather than a bacterium.

What can college students do to reduce their risks?

Getting the vaccine is an important step to consider. A good balanced lifestyle, including a healthy diet, adequate rest, and exercise, goes a long way towards keeping you healthy in college. You should not smoke, avoid second-hand smoke, and avoid excessive use of alcohol.

Tell me more about the vaccine.

In the past, vaccination against meningitis was typically delayed until an outbreak had surfaced. Recent recommendations from the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American College Health Association state that the vaccination should be given before an outbreak occurs. Side effects are generally mild, as described above. The vaccine should not be administered if you are ill or running a fever, or if you are allergic to the preservative thimerosal or any other component of the vaccine. If a student is pregnant, she should consult with her private health care provider regarding the risks and benefits of the vaccine.

How effective is the vaccine, and how long does it last?

The vaccine has been shown to provide antibodies against meningitis in 90 percent of the population studied. Meningitis vaccine may not protect 100 percent of susceptible individuals. Protection lasts from three to five years.

For more information about meningococcal meningitis...

Talk to your health care provider when you get your physical this summer. Visit the W&J Student Health Center, or call 724-223-6047. You might also wish to consult the Web sites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo, and the American College Health Association, www.acha.org.

Where can I get the vaccine?

Your private health care provider can administer the vaccine. Or, the meningitis vaccine is available in the Washington, Pennsylvania, area at MedExpress Urgent Care for \$110 on a walk-in basis. For more information, contact MedExpress at 724-225-3627.

REQUIRED



Acknowledgment of Meningitis Vaccine Information

Student full name _____

Home address _____

W&J ID number _____

Signature of parent or legal guardian, if the student is under 18 years old

Please check the statement that applies to you.

- I received the meningitis vaccine on _____
- I will receive the meningitis vaccine prior to arrival at Washington & Jefferson College in September.
- I have read and understand the information about meningitis, and I decline the meningitis vaccine at this time.
- I understand that if I decide in the future that I want the vaccine, I am responsible for obtaining it.

Please return to:

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