

February 11, 2003

Meningococcal Disease: The Basics

Because of concerns over meningococcal disease, five states — Maryland, Virginia, Connecticut, Florida and Pennsylvania — have laws requiring college freshmen to be vaccinated or sign waivers. Another nine states have laws requiring colleges to inform incoming freshmen about the disease and the vaccine.

PREVENTION Aside from being vaccinated, children and teenagers should be advised not to share drinks, water bottles, cigarettes, utensils, lipstick and other saliva conduits with other people, even if they appear to be healthy.

RISK The risk seems to be highest in the weeks that lie just ahead — in the latter part of winter and in the early spring.

The other risk factors involve living in a crowded facility, like a dormitory, having a cold or flu, active or passive smoking, drinking alcohol and having a deficient immune system.

SYMPTOMS Meningococcal meningitis is easier to catch, and its symptoms often include a very bad headache, a stiff neck, pain that accompanies movement of the neck, sensitivity to light and a moderate fever.

Meningococemia, the more deadly disease, is also more difficult to diagnose because symptoms commonly mimic those of the flu. They include a moderate fever, nausea, vomiting and extreme pain in the muscles, particularly those in the legs.

The one telltale symptom is a purple rash. The spots can be as small as the head of a pin or as large as a quarter. Anyone having such a rash is urged to seek medical attention immediately.

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