

**ABAC STUDENT HEALTH CENTER**  
ABAC 52, 2802 MOORE HIGHWAY  
TIFTON GA 31794  
(229) 391-5030

## **MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

### **What is Meningococcal Disease?**

Meningococcal Disease is a serious, contagious, but largely preventable, bacterial infection that can lead to death within a few hours after onset. The disease most commonly causes meningitis (an inflammation of the brain and spinal cord) or septicemia (an overwhelming infection carried by the bloodstream). There are about 3000 cases of Meningococcal Disease in the United States every year. One in 10 cases of Meningococcal Disease is fatal. One in 7 survivors of the disease is left with a severe disability such as the amputation of arms and legs, mental retardation, paralysis, deafness or seizures.

### **What Causes Meningococcal Disease?**

Meningococcal Disease is caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitides*. There are five strains of this bacteria, called A, B, C, Y, and W-135. Most cases of disease in the United States are caused by strains B, C and Y.

### **How is Meningococcal Disease Diagnosed?**

The diagnosis is made by testing a specimen of spinal fluid obtained in a hospital by lumbar puncture (spinal tap).

### **How is Meningococcal Disease Spread?**

Meningococcal Disease is spread through droplets in the air containing disease carrying respiratory secretions of people infected with the disease. Direct contact with an infected person, such as sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, cigarettes has the greatest risk. Direct contact also includes touching and kissing. Other body fluids of infected people are also considered infectious. Scientific data also suggests that certain other social behaviors such as active and passive smoking, going to bars and excessive alcohol consumption may increase a student's risk of contracting the disease.

Studies have shown that dormitory living may also play a role in the spread of the disease on college campuses because students live in confined environments, thus facilitating the spread of the disease. College students living in dorms are considered at moderately increased risk of acquiring this infection as compared to the general population.

Fortunately, the bacteria that causes Meningococcal Disease is not as contagious as other germs such as those that cause the common cold or flu. The bacteria that causes Meningococcal Disease is not thought to be easily spread by breathing the air where an infected person has been. The bacteria that causes Meningococcal Disease cannot live for long outside of the body and cannot be transmitted from tap water, swimming pools or off surfaces in buildings such as door knobs.

Meningococcal Disease is a relatively rare disease, occurring from time to time throughout the year, but is most common in the late winter and early spring.

### **What are the symptoms of Meningococcal Disease?**

Early symptoms of Meningococcal Disease include high fever, the worst headache of your life, stiff or painful neck, skin rash, nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light and extreme fatigue. Sometimes students think they may have the flu. Because the disease gets worse so rapidly, often in as little as 12 to 48 hours, students are urged to seek health care immediately if they are rapidly getting sicker and sicker and experience two or more of these symptoms at the same time:

- Fever greater than 101 degrees **AND**
- The worst headache of your life
- Confusion or other mental changes
- Neck or back stiffness or pain
- Sensitivity to light
- Skin rash

In other words, if you have these severe symptoms and you are quickly getting sicker and sicker, do not wait for your doctor's office to open in the morning, for an appointment in a week or for the ABAC Student Health Service to open on Monday if today is Saturday. Go to the Emergency Room.

### **How is Meningococcal Disease Treated?**

There are antibiotics to prevent Meningococcal Disease in people with known exposure to someone with active Meningococcal Disease. There are antibiotics to treat a person sick with the disease, but these do not always save the person's life.

### **Is There a Vaccine?**

There is a Meningococcal Disease Vaccine that will decrease the risk of acquiring this infection. The CDC and the National Immunization Program recommend that college students living in dormitories receive the Vaccine. College students who do not live in dormitories may also choose to take the Vaccine. The Vaccine provides protection against four of the five strains of the infection – A, C, Y and W-135. Recent scientific studies have shown that the majority of cases (65%) in the college age group are caused by these four strains. Strain B, the cause of up to 35% of cases is **NOT** covered by the Vaccine. The Meningococcal Disease Vaccine, like all vaccines, is **NOT** 100% effective. A person may occasionally develop Meningococcal Disease even if they have taken the Vaccine. The need for, or timing of, a booster dose of Menactra vaccine has not yet been determined.

### **Is the Vaccine Safe?**

The Vaccine is thought to be very safe. Adverse reactions are usually mild, consisting primarily of redness and pain at the site of injection lasting up to 2 days. If you choose to take the Vaccine, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire to insure that you don't take the Vaccine when you are sick with high fever, pregnant, allergic to vaccine components or have certain medical conditions that may put you at risk of complications. Recently, there were a few cases of Guillain-Barre Syndrome in individuals following vaccination with Menactra. There is not enough evidence yet to tell whether they were caused by the vaccine. This is being investigated by health officials.