MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by bacteria. It is the leading cause of bacterial meningitis in children 2-18 years of age in the United States. Meningococcal bacterial can cause meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or sepsis (an infection of the bloodstream). Symptoms of meningitis include stiff neck, headache, fever, nausea, vomiting, confusion and drowsiness. Symptoms of sepsis include fever, shock and coma. Death from sepsis can occur within 12 hours of the beginning of the illness. Meningococcal disease can be a rapid and overwhelming infectious disease. For these reasons, meningococcal infections that occur in childcare centers, elementary schools, high schools and colleges often cause panic in the community. Every year about 2,600 people in the United States are infected with meningococcus. Ten to fifteen percent of these people die, in spite of treatment with antibiotics. Of those who live, another 10 percent lose their arms or legs, become deaf, have problems with their nervous systems, become mentally retarded or suffer seizures or strokes.

How do you catch a meningococcal infection? Usually meningococcal infection is acquired after intimate contact with an infected person. Intimate contact includes kissing, sharing toothbrushes or eating utensils or frequently eating or sleeping in the same dwelling as an infected individual.

Who is at risk? Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than 1 year of age and in people with certain medical conditions. College freshmen, particularly those who live in dormitories, have a slightly increased risk of getting meningococcal disease. The risk for meningococcal disease among non-freshman college students is similar to that for the general population; however, the vaccine is safe and effective and therefore can be provided to non-freshmen undergraduates who want to reduce their risk for meningococcal disease.

What can be done to decrease risk? The meningococcal vaccine can prevent four types of meningococcal disease. These include two of the three most common types in the United States. Meningococcal vaccine cannot prevent all types of the disease, but it does help to protect people who might become sick if they don’t get the vaccine. The vaccine is available through a variety of settings including physician offices and university/college student health centers.

What about the vaccine? A vaccine, like any other medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. People should not get meningococcal vaccine if they have ever had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine. Some people who get the vaccine may develop redness or pain where the shot was given, and a small percentage of people develop a fever. These symptoms usually last for one or two days. The risk of the meningococcal vaccine causing serious harm is extremely small. Getting meningococcal vaccine is safer than getting the disease. Those with moderate or severe illnesses should usually wait until they recover. College students and their parents should discuss the timing, risks and benefits of vaccination with their health care providers.

Where can I get the vaccine? Most primary care providers can provide the meningococcal vaccine. The vaccine is also available at the McGrath Health and Wellness Center. We do not bill insurance companies directly but will provide you with the necessary paperwork for you to submit a claim to your own health insurance. The meningococcal vaccine is a Xavier requirement.

For more information about the meningococcal vaccine access the Vaccine Information Sheet at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) web site: http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/spec-grps/college.htm