

# Meningococcal Disease and Vaccine: What College Students Need to Know

**Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but college freshman living in dorms are at increased risk and should get vaccinated.**

## What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by a bacterium. It can cause meningitis, which is an infection of the brain and spinal cord, and it can also cause blood infections. The infection can cause death or lifelong disability.

About 375 people get the disease each year, and about 10 to 15 out of 100 people infected with meningococcal disease die. Of those who survive, up to one out of five have permanent disabilities, such as deafness, brain damage, loss of limbs, or seizures.

A person with meningococcal disease may become seriously ill very quickly. Antibiotics can treat meningococcal infections, but often can't be given soon enough to help.

## What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms can include:

- High fever
- Headache
- Very stiff neck
- Confusion
- Nausea
- Sensitivity to light
- Vomiting
- Exhaustion

If a person has a blood disease, a rash may also develop. Early symptoms can easily be mistaken for influenza or other illnesses. Contact your student health service or health care provider immediately if you have symptoms.

## How does meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread by contact with secretions (saliva or spit) from the nose and throat. Kissing, sharing silverware, drinking directly from the same container, sharing a cigarette or lipstick, coughing, and having close social contact (living in the same household) are examples of how this disease spreads.

## How can you prevent meningococcal disease?

Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to prevent meningococcal disease. Other ways to prevent infection include washing your hands often and avoiding sharing things like silverware, drinking containers, lipstick, and smoking materials.

## What are the options for meningococcal vaccine?

Meningococcal vaccine (MenACWY) is highly effective at protecting against four strains of the meningococcal bacteria. Three strains are common in the United States and the fourth strain protects travelers to certain countries where the disease is more common.

The MenACWY vaccine does not contain the meningococcal B strain that may cause some cases in adolescents/young adults. The meningococcal B vaccine (MenB) can be given to people age 16-23 years. MenB vaccine is also recommended for people age 10 years and older with certain high-risk conditions. If your clinic does not carry the MenB vaccine, you can ask them to order it for you, or to refer you to another clinic that has the

vaccine. Talk to your health care provider about this additional vaccine.

## Who should get the meningococcal vaccines?

The MenACWY vaccine is recommended for college freshman living in a dormitory. The vaccine has been recommended for 11-12 year olds since 2005, so it is possible that incoming freshmen have already received a dose. If you received a dose before age 16, you should get a booster before you go to college.

## What are the risks from meningococcal vaccines?

Most people have mild side effects from the vaccine, such as redness or pain where the shot was given. A vaccine, like any medicine, may cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. This risk is extremely small. Getting the meningococcal vaccine is much safer than getting the disease.

You can learn more on the [Vaccine Information Statements](http://www.immunize.org/vis/) (www.immunize.org/vis/) for meningococcal ACWY and meningococcal B.

## Are free or low-cost meningococcal shots available?

Yes, if you don't have insurance or your insurance does not cover the cost of the meningococcal vaccines, you may be able to find free or low-cost meningococcal shots. Note that there may still be an administration fee of up to \$21.22 per shot.

- If you are **18 years old or younger**: Talk to your doctor or clinic to see if they participate in the Minnesota Vaccines for Children Program.
- If you are **19 years old or older**: Go to [Vaccination Clinics Serving Uninsured and Underinsured Adults](http://www.health.state.mn.us/people/immunize/basics/uuavsearch.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/people/immunize/basics/uuavsearch.html) to search for a clinic near you that offers low-cost vaccines for eligible adults.

- Talk to your city or county health department. They may be able to provide low-cost meningococcal shots.

## How can I learn more?

Talk to your doctor or clinic, or call your local health department's immunization program. You can also find information on these websites:

- [MDH: Meningococcal Disease](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/meningoccal/index.html) (www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/meningoccal/index.html)
- [CDC: Meningococcal Vaccination](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/mening/index.html) (www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/mening/index.html)
- [National Meningitis Association](http://www.nmaus.org) (www.nmaus.org)

Vaccine Preventable Disease Section  
PO Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-5503 or 1-800-657-3970  
[www.health.state.mn.us/immunize](http://www.health.state.mn.us/immunize)

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