

Minnesota Department of Health

Meningococcal Vaccine: Why Preteens and Teens Should Get It

Preteens should receive a single shot of meningococcal vaccine during their 11-12 year old check-up. If your teenager missed getting the vaccine at his/her check-up, ask the doctor about getting it now.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness caused by a bacteria. It can cause meningitis, a very serious infection around the brain and spinal cord, or a blood infection. The infection can cause death, loss of an arm or a leg, and mental retardation. It often progresses so quickly that a child can be perfectly well and, in just a few hours, be hospitalized in critical condition.

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent this disease. Antibiotics can be used to treat meningococcal infections, but often can't be given soon enough to help.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but it is most common in infants less than 1 year of age. While teens are less likely to be infected than infants, disease levels increase in adolescence, around age 11, and peak around age 19.

About 2,600 people get meningococcal disease each year in the U.S. About 300 of these people die. Of those who recover, about 400 have permanent disabilities such as deafness, mental retardation, loss of limbs, and seizures.

What are the symptoms of meningitis?

Symptoms can include a high fever, headache, a very stiff neck, confusion, nausea, sensitivity to light, vomiting, and exhaustion. A rash may also develop. The person may become seriously ill very quickly and early symptoms can easily be mistaken for the flu. That's why immunization is so important -- to prevent infection in the first place.

How does meningococcal disease spread?

Meningococcal disease is spread by close or direct contact with secretions from the nose and throat. Sharing food or beverages, coughing, kissing, and having close social contact (living in the same household or attending childcare) are examples of how this disease spreads.

How effective is the meningococcal vaccine?

The vaccine is highly effective at preventing four of the strains of bacteria that cause meningococcal meningitis. Seventy-six percent of cases among 11-19 year olds are vaccine preventable.

How can I protect my child from getting meningococcal disease?

Be sure your child is immunized against meningococcal disease. Other ways for everyone to prevent infection include washing your hands often and avoiding sharing forks, spoons, drinking containers, lipstick, and smoking materials.

How can I learn more?

Ask your healthcare provider, or call your local health department's immunization program or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1-800-232-4636. Or visit these websites:

- Minnesota Department of Health
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/meningococcal/index.html
- Immunization Action Coalition
www.immunize.org/vis/vis_menin.asp
- National Center for Infectious Disease
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningococcal_g.htm
- National Meningitis Association
www.nmaus.org



Immunization Program
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975
651-201-5503 or 1-800-657-3970
www.health.state.mn.us/immunize