

MENINGOCOCCAL DISEASE AND CAMP ATTENDEES

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by an infection from the *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria. These bacteria can infect the tissue (the “meninges”) that surrounds the brain and spinal cord and cause meningitis, or they may infect the blood or other organs of the body. In the U.S., about 1,000–3,000 people get meningococcal disease each year and 10–15 percent die despite receiving antibiotic treatment. Of those who survive, about 11–19 percent may lose limbs, become deaf, have problems with their nervous system, become mentally retarded, or have seizures or strokes.

How is meningococcal disease spread?

These bacteria are passed from person-to-person through saliva (spit). You must be in close contact with an infected person’s saliva in order for the bacteria to spread. Close contact includes activities such as kissing, sharing water bottles, sharing eating/drinking utensils or sharing cigarettes with someone who is infected; or being within three to six feet of someone who is infected and is coughing and sneezing.

Who is at most risk for getting meningococcal disease?

People who travel to certain parts of the world where the disease is very common are at risk for meningococcal disease. Children and adults with damaged or removed spleens or an inherited immune disorder (called “terminal complement component deficiency”) are also at risk. People who live in settings such as college dormitories are also at greater risk of disease.

Are camp attendees at increased risk for meningococcal disease?

Children attending day or residential camps are not considered to be at an increased risk for meningococcal disease because of their participation.

Is there a vaccine against meningococcal disease?

There are currently two vaccines available in the U.S. that protect against four of the most common of the 13 serogroups (subgroups) of *N. meningitidis* that cause serious disease. Protection with the meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine lasts about three to five years. A meningococcal vaccine (conjugate vaccine), which was licensed in January 2005, is expected to help decrease disease transmission and to provide more long-term protection.

Should my child receive meningococcal vaccine?

Meningococcal vaccine is not recommended for attendance at camps. However, this vaccine is recommended for certain age groups; contact your child’s healthcare provider. In addition, parents of children who are at higher risk of infection, because of certain medical conditions or other circumstances, should discuss vaccination with their child’s healthcare provider.

How can I protect my child from getting meningococcal disease?

The best protection against meningococcal disease and many other infectious diseases is thorough and frequent handwashing, respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette. Individuals should:

1. Wash their hands often, especially after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food (hands should be washed with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand gel or rub may be used if hands are not visibly dirty);
2. Cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and discard the tissue in a trash can; or if they don’t have a tissue, cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve.
3. Not share food, drinks or eating utensils with other people, especially if they are ill.

You can obtain more information about meningococcal disease or vaccination from your healthcare provider, your local Board of Health, or the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617.983.6800 or toll-free at 888.658.2850 or on the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph.