

Eastern Connecticut State University
Student Health Services

Meningitis Questions/Answers*

Q: What is meningitis?

A: Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ depending on the cause. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and clears up without specific treatment. But bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, learning disabilities or death. For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people. Before the 1990s, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis. Today, *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* are the leading causes of bacterial meningitis. *N meningitidis* is the main cause of meningitis among college age persons although the number of cases each year is extremely small. In addition to meningitis, *N meningitidis* can also cause a potentially deadly blood infection called meningococemia that can occur with meningitis or by itself.

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

A: High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 to 2 days. Other symptoms may include inflamed, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

Bacterial Meningitis Questions/Answers

Q: How is bacterial meningitis diagnosed?

A: Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal can be collected. Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for selection of correct antibiotics. Blood testing is also helpful in the diagnosis of this disease.

Q: Can bacterial meningitis be treated?

A: Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important, however, that treatment be started early in the course of the disease. Appropriate antibiotic treatment of most common types of bacterial meningitis should reduce the risk of dying from meningitis to below 15%, although the risk is higher among the elderly.

Q: Is bacterial meningitis contagious?

A: Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria can mainly be spread from person to person through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions. This can occur through coughing, kissing, and sneezing, sharing eating utensils and beverages. Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis is as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu. Also, the bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been. However, sometimes the bacteria that cause meningitis have spread to other people who have had close or prolonged contact with a patient with meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* (also called meningococcal meningitis). People in the same household or daycare center or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) would be considered at increased risk of getting the infection. People who qualify as **close contacts** of a person with meningitis caused by *N. meningitidis* should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease. Just being in a regular classroom, office or other building with an infected person **does not qualify as a close contact.**

Q: Is there a vaccine to prevent *N. meningitidis* meningitis?

A: Yes, there are safe and effective vaccines (one is Menactra) that prevent bacterial meningitis caused by *Neisseria meningitidis*, types A,C,X,W-135 but not type B meningitis. There is a different vaccine now available to prevent *Neisseria meningitidis* type B.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends routine vaccination of all persons aged 11-18 years of age with the meningitis vaccine. Pre-teens who are 11-12 years old should be routinely vaccinated at the 11-12 year old check-up as recommended by ACIP. This visit is the best time for adolescents to receive the vaccine. Also, since the occurrence of meningococcal disease increases during adolescence, health-care providers should vaccinate previously unvaccinated pre-teens and teens aged 11-18 years at the earliest possible health-care visit.

College freshmen living in dormitories are at increased risk—a very small one—for meningococcal disease and should be vaccinated with the vaccine before college entry if they have not previously been vaccinated.

Remember, MENINGITIS VACCINE (i.e. Menactra) FOR TYPES A,C,X,W-135 IS REQUIRED UNDER CONNECTICUT STATE LAW FOR ANY STUDENT WHO WILL BE LIVING ON CAMPUS. **Also, state law now requires that students get another meningitis shot if they received their previous meningitis vaccine(s) more than five years before their starting date at college.** Although the meningitis requirement applies only to students living in campus housing, the Student Health Service recommends this vaccine for all incoming students. *Please note: The new meningitis vaccine for *Neisseria meningitidis* type B is not required by the state or the University at this time but, because this type of meningitis has caused serious illness and deaths on college campuses in recent years, we recommend you speak with your health care provider about receiving this vaccine.*

Q: Does Eastern's Student Health Service offer meningitis vaccines?

A: Because almost all college students are now immunized before arriving at college, the Health Service Office no longer offers this vaccine at our office as there is little demand for it. For students still needing the vaccine, we recommend seeing your primary health care provider for it, or try a walk-in clinic. Insurance should cover most or all of the cost.

If you have questions, please email ([click on the staff link](#)); or, call us at the number below.

(*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC)

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