

## Meningitis Vaccine Now Required for High School Students

Although Summer vacation just started, it's not too early to start making back-to-school plans. There's something new on that list for parents this year. Effective the upcoming 2016-2017 school year, the Ohio Department of Health is requiring the meningococcal vaccine be administered to students before entering the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and a second vaccination before starting the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Meningococcal disease is caused by the bacteria *Neisseria meningitidis* and is among the most devastating infections possible for individuals and their communities. Reports of confirmed or even suspected cases can induce considerable panic, even among well-informed healthcare workers. This is probably because meningococcal meningitis tends to strike young, previously well individuals and can progress over a matter of hours to death. Despite having one of the best healthcare systems in the world, the mortality rate of meningococcal disease in the United States is 10-14%.

Fortunately, meningococcal disease is rare, affecting about 1,000 people in the United States each year. It is most commonly diagnosed among infants, adolescents, and young adults. While the disease is rare, the bacteria that causes it is common and many of us live with it in our throats and nasal passages. Studies have shown up to one-third of college students carry the bacteria, particularly those living in college housing. It is not well understood why a small percentage of them will become infected.

Symptoms of meningococcal meningitis include sudden onset of fever, headache, and neck stiffness. Nausea, vomiting, and confusion are common. Victims can become profoundly ill quickly. The good news is there are antibiotics effective against meningococcal disease providing they are started quickly. Many who survive though, are left with life changing complications. Meningococcal disease is highly contagious which places others in the community at risk. Intimate contacts, family, college

roommates, and nursery school classmates are at 100- to 1000-fold increased risk of acquiring meningococcal infection. Fortunately, a single dose of antibiotics can protect contacts from infection and public health officials work hard to identify these contacts when an infection is reported.

The best news is there are safe and effective vaccines against this horrific disease. The requirements for high school students to receive the vaccination not only protects our young-people, but our community as well. In addition to the meningococcal vaccine, students entering the 7<sup>th</sup> grade are also required to have the Tdap immunization for protection against tetanus and pertussis. If the first dose of meningococcal vaccine was administered on or after a student's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, a second dose is not required.

For questions about the meningococcal vaccine or to schedule an appointment to receive it, call the Adams County Health Department at 937-544-5547.

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