



Contact Information:

Ellyn Terry
National Foundation for Infectious Diseases
<http://www.nfid.org>
(301) 656-0003x13

National Foundation for Infectious Diseases Calls on College Campuses to Be Prepared for Meningococcal Disease

Bethesda, MD (April 24, 2015) – Recent meningococcal meningitis outbreaks on U.S. college campuses illustrate the importance of vaccination against this devastating and potentially deadly infection. In recognition of World Meningitis Day, the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) urges all students, their parents, and healthcare professionals, both on campuses and in the surrounding communities, to learn more about the disease and how to prevent it.

“College campuses are a focus of meningococcal disease prevention efforts because outbreaks are more likely to occur in these crowded living and learning environments,” says Carol J. Baker, MD, NFID past-president and professor of Pediatrics, Molecular Virology & Microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine. “But even for those not on college campuses, the risk of getting meningococcal meningitis increases during adolescence and young adult years.”

Although rare, the disease can progress rapidly, killing an otherwise healthy individual in less than 48 hours. It also leaves up to 20 percent of survivors with permanent and serious complications such as hearing loss, brain damage, and amputation. The disease is spread through air droplets and direct contact with an infected person, such as kissing, sharing beverages, etc.

Four of the five major strains of meningococcal bacteria: A, C, W and Y, have been included in the meningococcal vaccines given in the U.S. for more than a decade, as part of the adolescent vaccination schedule. Routine vaccination against these strains is currently recommended for adolescents age 11- 12 years old, with a booster dose at age 16 years.

Two new vaccines to protect against a fifth strain, serogroup B, were recently approved (October 2014 and January 2015) by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The recent cases on U.S. college campuses were all caused by serogroup B, which is now the most common cause of meningococcal disease in U.S. adolescents.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) currently recommends the use of the newly-approved serogroup B vaccines only for those at increased risk of infection, including college students on campuses experiencing outbreaks caused by the serogroup B bacteria.

Need for Ongoing Education and Awareness

Even though meningococcal disease incidence is currently at an all-time low, its severity is alarming. Approximately one in 10 who get it, will die. And, according to a recent [NFID report](#), meningococcal disease is characterized by its volatile and irregular epidemiology. No one can predict when, or to what extent, incidence will increase in the future.

In its report, NFID advised students, parents, healthcare professionals and administrators to be aware of the latest information about this infectious disease, with a focus on prevention.

- **Rapid diagnosis is critical.** Healthcare professionals and students need to recognize the symptoms. Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as flu or other common viral illnesses. Symptoms may include some combination of high fever, headache, stiff neck, confusion, nausea, vomiting, exhaustion and a purplish rash. If any of these symptoms are present and are unusually sudden, progressive, or severe, call a physician immediately.
- **Be proactive and prepared.** Colleges and universities should have plans in place and be prepared to manage cases or outbreaks, including prevention programs and educational resources that are readily available.
- **Get vaccinated.** Vaccination is the best way to protect against meningococcal disease. For more information and educational resources, visit the NFID website focused on adolescents: adolescentvaccination.org.

About NFID

The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1973 and dedicated to educating the public and healthcare professionals about the causes, treatment and prevention of infectious diseases across the lifespan. For more information, visit www.nfid.org.

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