

Meningitis Press Release from the Red Willow County Health Department

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Recent cases of meningitis in children in Southeast Nebraska have prompted the local and district health departments to inform the public about prevention of meningitis. Did you know that there are approximately 1,000-1,200 cases of meningococcal disease in the United States each year?

Meningococcal disease, a type of bacterial meningitis, can be very serious -- even life-threatening -- in 48 hours or less.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), symptoms of meningococcal disease (an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord) are usually sudden onset of fever, headache, and stiff neck. It can start with symptoms similar to influenza (flu), and will often also cause nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, rash, and confusion. Even with antibiotic treatment, people die in about 10-15% of cases. About 15% of survivors will have long-term disabilities, such as loss of limb(s), deafness, nervous system problems, or brain damage.

Meningococcal disease can be spread from person to person. The bacteria are spread by exchanging respiratory and throat secretions during close or lengthy contact (for example, coughing or kissing), especially if living in the same dorm or household. Many people carry the bacteria in their throats without getting meningococcal disease. Since so many people carry the bacteria, most cases of meningococcal disease appear to be random and aren't linked to other cases. Although anyone can get meningococcal disease, adolescents and college freshmen who live in dormitories are at an increased risk.

Health precautions to avoid meningitis are the same as those generally recommended to avoid illness: wash your hands, cough in your elbow, stay home if you are ill, and contact a physician if you are very ill.

The good news is that there are vaccines to help prevent meningococcal disease. Meningococcal vaccine can prevent two of the three most common disease-causing strains. The vaccine is routinely recommended for all 11-18 year olds. Kids should get this vaccine, known as the meningococcal conjugate vaccine, at their 11-12 year old check-up, along with other vaccines and preventive services. If your teenager missed getting the vaccine at his/her check-up, ask the doctor about getting it now...especially if your child is heading off to college to live in a dorm.

Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) vaccine prevents meningitis, pneumonia (lung infection), epiglottitis (a severe throat infection), and other serious infections caused by a type of bacteria called *Haemophilus influenzae* type b. It is recommended for all children under 5 years old in the US, and it is usually given to infants starting at 2 months old.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends that pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV13) be given to all children younger than 5 years of age – to protect them when they are at greatest risk for serious diseases including meningitis caused by pneumococcal bacteria. Children 6 to 18 years of age with certain underlying medical conditions (e.g., heart disease, lung disease, cancer) should also be vaccinated.

For more information or to schedule an immunization update, please contact your local Red Willow County Health Department at 308-345-1790 or toll free 877-250-2057. Other resources are the district health department, Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department, 308-345-4223 or visit www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html for a good online resource.