



Information about Meningococcal Disease and Vaccination and Waiver for Students at Residential Schools and Colleges

Legislation has been enacted in Massachusetts requiring all new students at residential schools (e.g., boarding schools) with grades 9-12 and postsecondary institutions (e.g., colleges) that provide or license housing to:

1. receive meningococcal vaccine prior to the beginning of classes; or
2. fall within one of the exemptions in the law, which are discussed below.

The law provides an exemption for students signing a waiver that reviews the dangers of meningococcal disease and indicates that the vaccination has been declined. To qualify for this exemption, you are required to review the information below and sign the waiver at the end of this document. Please note, if a student is under 18 years of age, a parent or legal guardian must be given a copy of this document and must sign the waiver.

What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by infection with bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. These bacteria can infect the tissue that surrounds the brain and spinal cord called the "meninges" and cause meningitis, or they can infect the blood or other body organs. In the United States, about 2,600 people each year get meningococcal disease and 10-15% die despite receiving antibiotic treatment. Of those who survive, about 10% may lose limbs, become deaf, have seizures or strokes, or have other problems with their nervous system.

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, sneezing, coughing, sharing water bottles, sharing eating/drinking utensils or sharing cigarettes with someone who is infected.

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, as are military recruits who live in close quarters. Children and adults with damaged or removed spleens or an inherited disorder called "terminal complement component deficiency" are at higher risk. People who live in settings such as college dormitories are also at greater risk of infection.

Are some students in college and secondary schools at risk for meningococcal disease?

College freshmen living in residence halls or dormitories are at an increased risk for meningococcal disease as compared to individuals of the same age not attending college. The setting, combined with risk behaviors (such as alcohol consumption, exposure to cigarette smoke, sharing food or beverages, and activities involving the exchange of saliva), may be what puts college students at a greater risk for infection. There is insufficient information about whether new students in other congregate living situations (e.g., residential schools) may also be at increased risk for meningococcal disease. But, the similarity in their environments and some behaviors may increase their risk.

The risk of meningococcal disease for other college students, in particular older students and students who do not live in congregate housing, is not increased. However, meningococcal vaccine is a safe and efficacious way to reduce their risk of contracting this disease.

Is there a vaccine against meningococcal disease?

Yes, there are currently 2 vaccines available that protect against 4 of the most common of the 13 serogroups (subgroups) of *N. meningitidis* that cause serious disease. Meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is approved for use in those 2 years of age and older. In January 2005, a new type of meningococcal vaccine was licensed, called meningococcal conjugate vaccine, and is currently only approved for use in those 11- 55 years of age. Both types of meningococcal vaccines are acceptable for college students and residential school students 11 years of age and older. For those younger than 11 years of age, meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is the only licensed vaccine.

Both of the vaccines provide protection against four serogroups of the bacteria, called groups A, C, Y and W-135. These four serogroups account for approximately two-thirds of the cases that occur in the U.S. each year. Most of the remaining one-third of the cases are caused by serogroup B, which is not contained in the vaccine. Protection from immunization with the meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine is not lifelong; it lasts about 3 to 5 years in healthy adults (some people may be protected longer.) The meningococcal conjugate vaccine is expected to help

