

Addressing Meningitis Concerns On Campus

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Meningitis. This word sparks concern and sometimes panic due to the fatalities and complications caused by this rare disease. The mystery of its' origin, related to "pop-up" cases, is yet another factor that make this disease more difficult to understand. The disease strikes about 2800 Americans each year leading to approximately 300 deaths annually. During the last two years at the annual Summer Freshman Orientation parent program, this topic generated many questions and concerns.

During the Fall 1998/Spring 1999 academic year, the American College Health Association (ACHA), in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), conducted a surveillance study among colleges and universities across the country to assess the risk of meningococcal disease in the college population. The ACHA also came out with a statement that "recommends that college students consider vaccination to reduce their risk for potentially fatal meningococcal disease and that college health care providers take a proactive role in providing information and access to the meningococcal vaccine."

The Health Service has increased its' existing efforts to educate students and parents about the symptoms associated with bacterial meningitis. Comparisons between cold, flu and meningitis symptoms are provided to students on the back of the "After Care Instruction" sheet upon their visit to the Health Service, when applicable. Additional posters have been and are being developed to promote recognition of meningitis symptoms and encourage a healthy life style among students in an effort to avoid illness. This year, in conjunction with Eastern's Housing Office, the Health Service will be hosting immunization clinics in specific halls for all students. Immunizations, including the meningitis vaccine, are always available at the Health Service during regular operating hours. The clinics will provide students with additional access to meningitis, flu and hepatitis B immunizations. Posters and flyers, as well as advertisements in the Daily Eastern News, will advertise the dates and location of the residence hall clinics.

Meningococcal disease is transmitted through the air via droplets of respiratory secretions and direct contact with an infected person. The microbe, *Neisseria meningitidis*, is spread through oral contact such as kissing, sharing eating utensils, cigarettes or drinking glasses, and coughing or sneezing in someone's face. The early symptoms usually associated with meningococcal disease include fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting and lethargy, and may resemble the flu. Because the disease progresses rapidly, often in as little as 12 hours, students are urged to seek medical care immediately if they experience two or more of these symptoms concurrently.

Although anyone can come in contact with the bacteria that causes meningococcal disease, data indicates certain social behaviors, such as exposure to passive and active smoking, bar patronage, and excessive alcohol consumption, may put students at increased risk for the disease. For instance, alcohol and tobacco can suppress the immune system, leaving students more susceptible to infections. In May the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report of the 83 reported meningococcal cases involving college students during the past academic year, 1998/99. It showed that a rate of 0.7 cases per 100,000 for college undergraduates was slightly less than the over all rate for 18-21 year old individuals. But the rate was 1.4 cases per 100,00 for freshmen and 3.8 cases per 100,00 for freshmen living in residence halls. College freshmen are coming together for the first time in an environment plagued with stress, sleep deprivation and altered social behavior.

This starts the third year that the meningitis vaccine has been available to students through the Health Service for \$70.00. The cost may be paid for by check, cash or billed to their university account. The vaccine is believed to be effective for 3-5 years. It is effective for most, but not all, of the various strains of bacterial meningitis. The vaccine helps people create antibodies to suppress the bacteria. According to the CDC, the vaccine is 85-100% effective against approximately 70% of the strains associated with cases we tend to see in college students. If students feel they have been exposed to this disease, they should seek immediate medical attention. Prophylactic medication for exposure does not provide immunization from the disease.

On-line sources for this article, as well as additional information about bacterial meningitis may be accessed at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/meningitis_g.htm

<http://www.acha.org/special-prj/men.htm>

<http://www.ama-assn.org/sci-pubs/journals/most/recent/issues/jama/oc81788a.htm>

<http://www.cdc.gov/epo/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00046263.htm>

<http://www.mayohealth.org/mayo/common/htm/notfound.htm>

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