

August 13, 2008

Dear Parent/Guardian,

A requirement for schools mandates that each public, non-public, and charter schools distribute materials concerning Meningococcal disease and its vaccines to students and parents/guardians of students at the beginning of each year.

The information should include information about the causes, symptoms, and spread of meningococcal disease as well as places where parents/guardians may obtain additional information and vaccinations for their children.

What is meningitis?

Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person's spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. People sometimes refer to it as spinal meningitis. Meningitis is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Knowing whether meningitis is caused by a virus or bacterium is important because the severity of illness and the treatment differ. Viral meningitis is generally less severe and resolves without specific treatment, while bacterial meningitis can be quite severe and may result in brain damage, hearing loss, or learning disability. For bacterial meningitis, it is also important to know which type of bacteria is causing the meningitis because antibiotics can prevent some types from spreading and infecting other people.

What are the signs and symptoms of meningitis?

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningitis in anyone over the age of 2 years. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take 1 or 2 days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion, and sleepiness. In newborns and infants, the classic symptoms of fever headache, and neck stiffness may be absent or difficult to detect, and the infant may only appear slow or inactive, or be irritable, have vomiting, or be feeding poorly. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

How is meningitis diagnosed?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. If symptoms occur, the patient should see a doctor immediately. The diagnosis is usually made by growing bacteria from a sample of spinal fluid. The spinal fluid is obtained by performing a spinal tap, in which a needle is inserted into an area in the lower back where fluid in the spinal canal is readily accessible. Identification of the type of bacteria responsible is important for selection of correct antibiotics.

Can meningitis be treated?

Bacterial meningitis can be treated with a number of effective antibiotics. It is important, however, that treatment be started early in the course of the disease. Appropriate antibiotic treatment of most common types of bacterial meningitis should reduce the risk of dying from the meningitis to below 15%, although the risk is higher among the elderly.

Is meningitis contagious?

Yes, some forms of bacterial meningitis are contagious. The bacteria spread through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (i.e., coughing, kissing). Fortunately, none of the bacteria that cause meningitis are as contagious as things like the common cold or the flu, and they are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

People in the same household or day-care center, or anyone with direct contact with a patient's oral secretions (such as a boyfriend or girlfriend) would be considered at increased risk of acquiring the infection.

Are there vaccines against meningitis?

Two meningococcal vaccines are available in the U.S.:

- Meningococcal polysaccharide vaccine (MPSV4) has been available since the 1970s.
- Meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MCV4) was licensed in 2005.

Both vaccines can prevent 4 types of meningococcal disease, including 2 of the 3 types most common in the United States and a type that causes epidemics in Africa. Meningococcal vaccines cannot prevent all types of the disease. But they do protect many people who might become sick if they didn't get the vaccine.

Both vaccines work well, and protect about 90% of those who get it. MCV4 is expected to give better, longer-lasting protection.

MCV4 should also be better at preventing the disease from spreading from person to person. Vaccines may be obtained from your doctor or the Clay County Health Department.

Who should get meningococcal vaccine and when?

MCV4 is recommended for all children at their routine preadolescent visit (11-12 years of age). For those who have never gotten MCV4 previously, a dose is recommended at high school entry.

Meningococcal vaccine is also recommended for other people at increased risk for meningococcal disease:

- U.S. military recruits.
- College freshmen living in dormitories.
- Anyone traveling to, or living in, a part of the world where meningococcal disease is common, such as parts of Africa.
- Anyone who has a damaged spleen, or whose spleen has been removed.
- Anyone who has terminal complement component deficiency (an immune system disorder).
- People who might have been exposed to meningitis during an outbreak.

How can I learn more?

- ★ Ask your doctor or nurse. They can give you the vaccine package insert or suggest other sources of information.
- ★ Call you Clay County Health Department at 448-9021.
- ★ Contact the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
 - Call 1 800-234-4636 (1800-CDC-INFO)
 - Visit CDC's National Immunization Program website at www.cdc.gov/nip

Please contact your health care provider for specific instructions regarding your child.

Sincerely,

**Lynn Stoelting R.N.B.S.N.
Clay Community Schools**