

Meningitis: Should I get the vaccine? ^[1]

(1) Dear Alice,

I'm a college student and I've heard in the media that meningitis vaccine shots are recommended. How do I get more information and a shot?

(2) Dear Alice,

As a parent of a college freshman this fall, I was concerned about the increasing publicity that Meningitis has received recently over the networks. Since the population most likely to be infected includes young adults living in close quarters, do you recommend vaccination and where is it available?

A concerned Parent

Answer

Dear Reader and A concerned Parent,

Every so often meningitis and its vaccine receive quite a bit of media attention. It's great that you both are asking these questions because relying solely on media reports may not give you all the information needed to make educated decisions on whether or not to vaccinate. An in-depth look at the causes, the risk of contracting it, and the effectiveness of the vaccine may be considered when making your decision. While meningitis transmission is rare, factors such as age and community settings can increase the risk of contracting the bacteria. So, your notion is right on the money, A concerned Parent: because of this increased risk, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) ^[2] recommend that first year college students living in residence halls be immunized. There are different vaccines available to protect against the five most common serogroups. Read on for more about the available vaccines and additional recommendations.

Meningitis ^[3] is the name given to *any process* that causes an inflammation of the outer lining of the brain? a number of viruses, medical conditions, and bacteria can lead to this ailment. However, most discussions in the media refer to one type of meningitis: that caused by a specific bacterium named *Neisseria meningitidis*. In the United States, meningitis infections from this bacterium occur mainly in infants, preteens, teens, and young adults. These risks increase with the spread of respiratory and throat secretions (coughing, kissing, sharing saliva, etc.) or when individuals are in close quarters for lengthy periods of time, such as in residence halls. Meningitis transmission may be uncommon (in fact, it's less contagious than

the cold and flu viruses), but that's no reason to assume it's harmless. Among those undergoing antibiotic treatment for the infection, it is fatal for 10 to 15 percent and an additional 11 to 19 percent will have long-term disabilities. As such, looking towards prevention in the way of a vaccine is certainly a worthy consideration.

As you both referenced, there are vaccines that protect against the five most common strains of this bacterium: serogroups A, B, C, W, and Y. Currently, there are three quadrivalent vaccines that protect against serogroups A, C, W, and Y, and two vaccines that protect against serogroup B ? there isn't one vaccine that protects against all five. The CDC recommends that preteens aged 11 or 12 be vaccinated with one dose of the quadrivalent vaccine and then get a booster dose at age 16. For teens and young adults, vaccination is recommended starting at age 16, especially among those with certain medical conditions and those in certain community settings, such as a college campus. As with all medications and vaccines, there is the potential for adverse side effects from the meningitis vaccine [4], which can include slight pain and swelling at the injection site and a mild fever. Severe, life-threatening reactions are extremely rare.

While making a decision about whether or not to vaccinate, it's good to also know that each state has its own requirements for colleges and universities. Some states require all incoming students to provide documentation of vaccination while others have no requirements. If your school hasn't already notified you about their requirements, you may want to ask about any need for meningitis immunization compliance. For additional questions about your individual risk or about the vaccine, you can talk with a health care provider or check in with your college or university health center to make an appointment. They can also typically provide you with the vaccine if you do choose to be immunized against meningitis.

Making a decision about immunizations is one component of taking care of your health. Take a look at the Immunization, Screenings, and Tests [5] category in the *Go Ask Alice! General Health* [6] archives for more information on giving your health the best shot. Whether or not you or your loved ones get vaccinated, maintaining optimal health by eating a balanced diet, getting enough quality sleep, managing stress levels, and being physically active are also key components to staying healthy.

Alice!

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