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 with a bacterial meningococcal vaccine (there are currently no vaccines for the most common causes of viral or other types of meningitis). 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 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 meningitides* and is often called meningococcal meningitis to differentiate between other types of meningitis. 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. When treated early, some may not experience any long-term effects. However, among those undergoing antibiotic treatment for the infection, it’s fatal for 8 to 15 percent and can be up to 50 percent if it goes untreated. Further, some survivors may also experience neurological problems or hearing loss for the rest of their lives. 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 two 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. While the vaccines are recommended at younger ages, the CDC strongly encourages that preteens aged 11 or 12 be vaccinated with one dose of the quadrivalent vaccine and then get a booster dose at age 16. Further, between the ages of 16 and 18, people may opt to get a dose of the vaccine with serogroup B to ensure all five serogroups are covered. This is particularly encouraged among those who live certain community settings, such as a college campus. In order to maintain its efficacy, booster doses of the vaccines are recommended approximately every five years. Additionally, none of the vaccines contain live bacteria. As with all medications and vaccines, there is the potential for adverse side effects from the meningitis vaccine [3], which can include slight pain and swelling at the injection site and a mild fever. Severe, life-threatening reactions are extremely rare.

While the vaccine is a great preventative measure, the protection doesn't begin to kick in until about a week or so after the vaccine has been received. Due to this, it can be helpful to use other ways to reduce exposure to germs, such as washing your hands [4], limiting opportunities for shared saliva (e.g., kissing, sharing water bottles), and avoiding others who may be sick. Additionally, there are some people for whom this vaccine may not be as beneficial. Some of these situations include:

- People who have had a life-threatening allergic reaction to a previous meningococcal vaccine or to parts of the vaccine
- People who are pregnant or breastfeeding
- People who are feeling unwell

*List adapted from the CDC [5].*

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. You may also want to check your medical records (or have your child check theirs) to see if these vaccinations have been administered previously, and if so, when that occurred. 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 [6] category in the Go Ask Alice! General Health [7] 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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