Serogroup B Meningococcal Disease Outbreaks at Other American University Campuses

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To Emory Students and Families:

As you may be aware, there have been a number of cases of Serotype B meningococcal meningitis and other meningococcal bacterial infections on college campuses since last spring, including cases at Princeton, University of California, Santa Barbara and a possible recent case at Georgia Tech. At Emory, we have been fortunate to have had no cases at this time and our sympathy goes out to the individuals and campus communities impacted by these infections.

Meningococcal meningitis is a serious bacterial infection of the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. We have known for many years that this rare disease is unfortunately statistically more common in college freshmen living in close quarters in residence halls (much the same as it is more common in military recruits). As a result, most college campuses now require that students and parents be informed of this risk and all new students are strongly recommended to get a meningococcal vaccination or booster (Emory does this). Some colleges even mandate the vaccination. The American version of the meningococcal vaccine covers four (4) serotypes of the disease, including the most common Serotype A. However, the available vaccines unfortunately do not cover Serotype B.

The National Meningitis Association notes the following about the spread and symptoms of Meningococcal disease:

Meningococcal disease is contagious. The disease is transmitted through the exchange of respiratory droplets such as coughing or sneezing, or through direct contact with an infected person (e.g., kissing).

Meningococcal disease is often misdiagnosed as something less serious, as the symptoms often resemble those of the flu. Symptoms may include sudden high fever, headache, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, and exhaustion. Some people also develop a rash. Since symptoms progress quickly, it is very important that medical attention is sought immediately.

The information below is excerpted from a recent letter from the American College Health Association to college health services nationally, written after consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

The ongoing serogroup B meningococcal disease outbreak at Princeton University brings national attention to an issue of longstanding importance to the college health community. The dramatic decline in cases of meningococcal disease since the late 1990s coincides with the widespread use of the quadrivalent meningococcal vaccine in adolescents and students entering college.
Outbreaks of serogroup B meningococcal disease are rare. Since the first case last spring, Princeton officials have collaborated diligently with local and state public health officials and the CDC. After the third case (which defines an outbreak), the CDC initiated discussions with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for permission to acquire Bexsero, the serogroup B meningococcal vaccine that is licensed in Europe and Australia, to be made available for this specific outbreak. Cases of meningococcal disease are reportable in every state, and no spread beyond the Princeton campus has occurred or is expected.

It is well known that the close quarters of campus residence hall living puts students at increased risk for meningococcal disease. Educating the campus community in the following ways may help reduce risk:

- Take this opportunity to educate students and parents about the importance of the quadrivalent meningococcal vaccines and the need for a booster dose for students entering college if the first dose was given prior to age 16.
- Highlight the importance of good hygiene measures such as not smoking, avoiding secondhand smoke, and not sharing drinking and eating utensils and other items that have contacted saliva.
- Increase awareness of the early signs of disease and the need for quick treatment and prompt notification of local public health officials for a suspected case, allowing prompt post-exposure antibiotic prophylaxis.
- Consider using and distributing meningitis awareness materials on campus. Available resources include:
  - The CDC Preteen and Teen Vaccines page
  - Meningococcal Disease and Vaccination Fact Sheet from the National Meningitis Association [pdf]
  - Meningococcal Meningitis Flyer from the National Meningitis Association [pdf]

The CDC has excellent additional information, including Questions and Answers about the Serotype B meningococcus outbreaks, on their Meningococcal Disease page.

Vaccination against meningococcal meningitis, good hygiene, and healthy behaviors are our best defenses, and knowledge of disease symptoms can help those affected to receive immediate treatment. Antibiotic treatment, as well as prophylaxis of close personal contacts, is far more effective when started early. We share your hope that this serious infection will not touch other college campuses, including our own.

Yours in health and prevention,

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