

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

SERVING THE TOWNS OF BERLIN, ROCKY HILL AND WETHERSFIELD

Central Office:
505 Silas Deane Highway
Wethersfield, CT 06109
Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin Office:
240 Kensington Road
Berlin, CT 06037
Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248

Rocky Hill Office:
761 Old Main Street
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax: (860) 258-2767

www.ccthd.org

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Consider the Meningitis Vaccination before Sending Your Child to College

In just a couple of weeks, schools will reopen after an all-too-short summer vacation. Not only will younger children be boarding buses and lugging backpacks down the street, but older students will be heading off for college, many of them living away from home for the first time. As seasoned parents know, all children must receive a number of immunizations during the first 5 years of life in order to be admitted to the public school system; college time is another point at which parents and their children need to update their immunizations.

In the midst of TB tests and various booster shots, parents of children going off to college should also consider another precaution, the meningococcal vaccine. While this vaccine may not be offered routinely, some colleges and universities now require the incoming student to get immunized against meningitis. The month of August, designated as National Immunization Awareness Month, is an appropriate time to learn about this vaccine and to discuss with your child's physician the advisability of getting this shot.

Meningitis is a serious illness that infects the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. It can also cause sepsis, or blood infections. There are several types of meningitis. The vaccine that is available in the United States at the present time provides protection against 2 of the 3 types that are of most concern. A virus or a bacterium can cause meningitis.

Viral meningitis often resembles the flu and commonly occurs during the winter months. It is less severe than the bacterial form, and much more common. Many times, no treatment is required at all, and the illness runs its course in about 2 weeks.

Bacterial meningitis can be caused by different bacteria and is very serious. It can be a life-threatening disease, and must be treated immediately. Symptoms develop rapidly, in as little as a few hours. About 1 in 20 children with bacterial meningitis die. Additionally, 1 in 3 children who develop a blood infection do not survive. Overall, about 2600 people get meningococcal disease each year in the United States. Even with antibiotic treatment, 10-15% of these people die. Of the survivors, another 10% lose their arms or legs, become deaf, acquire mental retardation, develop seizures or have strokes, or have problems with their nervous systems.

The symptoms of meningitis include high fever, headache, and stiff neck in children over the age of 2. Nausea, vomiting, confusion, sensitivity to light, and sleepiness are other signs. In infants and children under the age of 2, these classic symptoms may be difficult to recognize, but reactions may be slowed, irritability may set in, and the child may feed poorly or vomit. Seizures can develop as the illness progresses in persons of any age.

Meningitis is a highly contagious disease, but treatment with antibiotics can be very effective if begun early in the development of the disease. It is also recommended for close contacts of the infected person. Currently, the vaccine for meningitis is optional. However, certain groups are at a higher risk of

developing this disease, so the vaccine should be given serious consideration for people who fall into the following groups:

- College freshmen, especially those living in dormitories.
- Medical and laboratory personnel.
- Travelers to certain countries.
- People without spleens.
- Military recruits.

Although it is not fool-proof, the vaccine that is presently available in this country is about 85% effective in protecting adolescents and adults against meningitis. There is another vaccine currently in use in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia that provides protection against an additional form of meningitis, and an even more effective vaccine should be available in this country in 2005.

More information about meningitis and the vaccine can be obtained by contacting the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) at (404) 332-4546 (www.cdc.gov/ncidod) or the Meningitis Foundation of American at (800) 668-1129 (www.musa.org). The Central Connecticut Health District, serving Berlin, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield, also has information about this and other public health issues and may be contacted at (860) 721-2822 (www.ccthd.org.)