



Frequently Asked Questions about

# The Meningococcal Vaccine

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## **Why is it now important that college students receive this vaccine? They haven't needed it in the past, have they?**

- In 1997, because of increasing rates of meningococcal disease among teenagers and young adults, and evidence that some college students were at high risk for the disease, the American College Health Association released a statement recommending that college students consider getting vaccinated against meningococcal disease and that colleges and universities provide access to the meningococcal vaccine for students who want to be vaccinated.<sup>1</sup>
- Two studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) during the 1998-1999 school year revealed that first-year college students who live in dormitories are at a slightly higher risk of meningococcal disease than other people in their age group.<sup>2,3</sup> Therefore, in October 1999, CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) modified its guidelines for use of meningococcal vaccine to recommend that vaccination be provided or made easily available to college students who want it.<sup>1,4</sup> In the past, the meningococcal vaccine had been used primarily in response to meningitis outbreaks and for people traveling to areas where meningitis is common, rather than as a way to more routinely protect people from disease.
- Meningococcal meningitis is an infection of the spinal cord and fluid that surrounds the brain. It can be quite severe, causing brain damage, hearing loss, and even death, and is very contagious. Therefore, protection offered by immunization is very important.

## **Why are college students who live in dormitories at greater risk?**

Meningitis is spread through close contact with an infected person's respiratory secretions (e.g., by coughing). Therefore, people who live in close quarters with someone who is infected are at greater risk. College dormitories tend to have a large number of students living in close quarters.

## **Does the meningococcal vaccine prevent all forms of meningitis?**

- No. The currently available meningococcal vaccine protects against four of the five most common types of meningococcal bacteria. In total, the vaccine can be expected to prevent about half of all cases of invasive meningococcal disease that occur in the U.S. The meningococcal vaccine does not prevent meningitis caused by other bacteria such as "strep" or Hib bacteria. Most cases of disease occur in children younger than five years of age. However, because the effectiveness of this vaccine is limited in infants and very young children, it is recommended only for children two years of age and older.<sup>5</sup>

Frequently Asked Questions about  
**The Meningococcal Vaccine** (continued)

**Sources:**

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2000). Meningococcal disease and college students: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 49(RR-7), 13-20.
- 2 Bruce MG, Rosenstein NE, Capparella JM, Shutt KA, Perkins BA, and Collins M. (2001). Risk factors for meningococcal disease in college students. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286(6), 688-693.
- 3 Harrison LH. Preventing meningococcal infections in college students. (2000). *Clinical Infectious Diseases Journal*, 30(4), 648-651.
- 4 CDC. (2000). Prevention and control of meningococcal disease: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 49(RR-7), 1-10.
- 5 American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Infectious Diseases. (2000). Meningococcal infections. In LK Pickering (Ed.), *Red Book: Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases* (25th ed., pp. 396-401). Elk Grove Village, IL: Author.