

# Learn about meningitis and how to stay safe

Meningitis and meningococcal disease are serious and potentially deadly diseases that can affect people of various ages, notably children under age five and adults over age 55.

However, college-aged men and women are often affected as well. That makes it key for incoming students who will be living in dormitories or residence halls to get the facts to keep themselves safe.

Meningococcal disease is any illness caused by a type of bacteria called “Neisseria meningitis,” which causes meningitis and bloodstream infections known as septicemia. Meningitis can be caused by parasites, fungi, amebic sources, viruses, and bacteria, states the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While each case of meningitis is significant, those caused by bacteria are often the most serious and can be deadly. Such cases of meningitis require immediate medical attention.

Bacterial meningitis can result from various bacteria entering the body. These include pneumococcus, meningococcus and listeria. In young children, a bacteria called “Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib)” was a common cause until the Hib vaccine became available, states WebMD. The bacteria that cause meningitis can spread when people who are infected cough or sneeze. That’s what makes it especially contagious in places where close contact is common, such as college dorms and even military barracks.

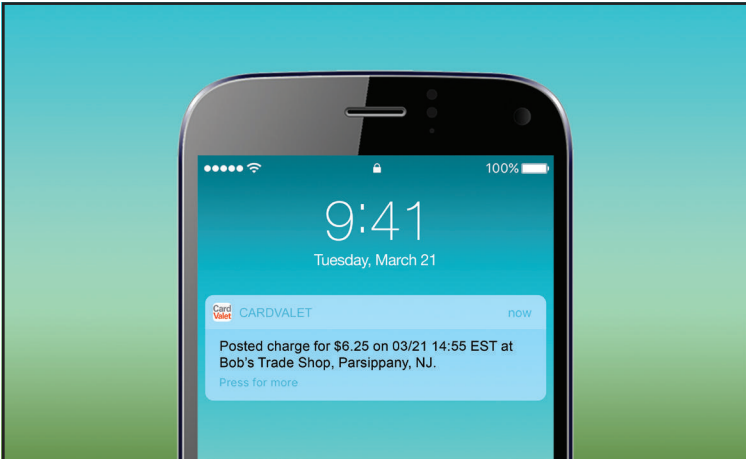
Meningitis also causes an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord, called the meninges. The Mayo Clinic says, if left untreated, meningitis complications can be severe and include permanent neurological damage. Some complications can include gait problems, hearing loss, difficulty with memory, brain damage, seizures, and kidney failure.

Meningitis often peaks in winter into early spring, right during the time influenza occurs. Many symptoms of both conditions overlap, including fever, neck stiffness, lethargy, nausea, unrelenting headache, and confusion. Because meningitis may be mistaken for flu, this can delay the onset of treatment.

While a regimen of antibiotics can help treat meningitis and meningococcal disease, the best defense is to mount a successful offense through vaccination. The CDC, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American College Health Association recommend meningitis vaccines. Vaccination produces immunity within seven to 10 days and remains effective for approximately three to five years.

Two vaccines protect against four types of meningococcal disease. An additional type of vaccine protects against serotype B, which also causes meningitis. Pre-teens are often given the vaccinations, with a booster dose at age 16.

Meningitis is a serious illness, but one that can be prevented or managed.



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