What is Meningococcal Meningitis?

Meningococcal disease can refer to any illness that is caused by the type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*, also known as meningococcus. The illness most people are familiar with is meningococcal meningitis, which people sometimes just call meningitis. This usually means the lining of the brain and spinal cord have become infected with these bacteria. But these bacteria can also cause other severe illnesses, like bloodstream infections (bacteremia or septicemia).

What is happening at Princeton University?

Princeton University has been experiencing a meningococcal meningitis outbreak, with 6 confirmed cases since March 2013. On Sunday 11/10/13, a 7th possible case was identified. Serogroup B is the identified strain causing this outbreak and this is not covered by the currently used meningitis vaccine. University of Pittsburgh has not seen any cases of bacterial meningitis this semester.

How is it transmitted?

Meningitis that is caused by bacteria like Neisseria meningitides and Streptococcus pneumonia is often severe and can be life-threatening. Young adults living in group housing, such as on a college campus or in military barracks, are at risk for bacterial meningitis.

Bacterial meningitis can be transmitted through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions (e.g., kissing). Fortunately, most of the bacteria that cause meningitis are not as contagious as diseases like the common cold or the flu. The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been.

Prevention

Vaccination is the most effective way to protect yourself against bacterial meningitis. Antibiotics may be recommended for close contacts of people with meningococcal meningitis.
Maintaining healthy habits, like frequent hand washing, not smoking and avoiding cigarette smoke, not sharing drinking cups and utensils, getting plenty of rest, and not coming into close contact with people who are sick, can also help.

**What is the Meningitis vaccine and who should get it?**

Two doses of MCV4 are recommended for adolescents 11 through 18 years of age: the first dose at 11 or 12 years of age, with a booster dose at age 16.

If the first dose (or series) is given between 13 and 15 years of age, the booster should be given between 16 and 18. If the first dose (or series) is given after the 16th birthday, a booster is not needed.

MCV4 can prevent 4 types of meningococcal disease, including 2 of the 3 types most common in the United States and a type that causes epidemics in Africa. There are other types of meningococcal disease; the vaccines do not protect against these.

PA State Law and University of Pittsburgh require all students living in campus housing receive the meningitis vaccine.

**Signs & Symptoms**

Meningitis infection may show up in a person by a sudden onset of fever, headache, and stiff neck. It will often have other symptoms, such as
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Increased sensitivity to light (photophobia)
- Altered mental status (confusion)

The symptoms of bacterial meningitis can appear quickly or over several days. Typically they develop within 3-7 days after exposure.

**Treatment**

Bacterial meningitis can be treated effectively with antibiotics. It is important that treatment be started as soon as possible. Appropriate antibiotic treatment of the most common types of bacterial meningitis should reduce the risk of dying from meningitis to below 15%, although the risk remains higher among young infants and the elderly.