

Protecting Your Child Against Meningitis

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Trying to protect your adolescent or young adult child against harm can seem pretty scary. There are so many things you feel helpless in protecting him or her against. Will they be safe? Will they adjust well when leaving home? One predator potentially lurking out there that you can help protect your child against is the meningococcal bacteria. Meningitis is an inflammation of the tissue covering the brain and spinal cord. It can be in response to many factors, but primarily is caused by bacteria or viruses. Meningococcal bacteria causes most of the meningitis cases over the age of 11. While its occurrence is relatively rare, its effects can be devastating. These include brain damage, loss of limbs, and hearing loss and even death.

Meningococcal bacteria is spread through close contact, primarily by secretions of the nose and throat. This can occur with coughing, sneezing, and yes, kissing. Because of the close contact that is typical among adolescents and college students, this age group has a greater risk for this illness. The symptoms of bacterial meningitis typically progress rapidly and include severe headache, nausea, vomiting, sensitivity to light, and confusion. The good news is that there are vaccines that will significantly reduce your child's risk of contracting this rare but serious illness.

The current recommendations are for your child to receive a meningitis vaccine at age 11 and a booster at age 16. These vaccines are a very important and effective tool in providing protection against the meningococcal bacteria. However, they only provide coverage against 2/3 of the strains of the bacteria. The FDA just has just recently approved the use of two new vaccines that protect against meningococcal B bacteria that causes approximately 1/3 of the cases of meningococcal disease. One of the vaccines is called Bexsero, which is given in two doses, one month apart. The other vaccine is Trumenba, which is given in 3 doses over six months. The preferred age for the vaccines is between 16 through 18 years of age, although it may be given up to age 23.

Sometimes the greatest threats can come in the smallest packages. This is true with this bacteria. So as your "baby" prepares to leave the nest, please consider and discuss this vaccine option with your child's health care provider.