

# Meningococcal Disease FAQ

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University  
Health  
Services

Several cases of meningococcal disease have been associated with the University since March 2013. The cases were caused by the meningococcal bacteria known as type B, which is not in the vaccine. State law requires all Princeton students living in dorms to have received the meningitis vaccine, which protects against most strains of the bacteria, but not type B.

## How to prevent the spread of meningococcal disease:

- Do NOT share anything that comes in contact with the mouth including:
  - Water bottles
  - Mouth guards
  - Face masks
  - Towels
  - Drinking glasses
  - Eating utensils
  - Cosmetics
  - Toothbrushes
  - Smoking materials
  - Kisses
  - Food or drink from a common source such as a punch bowl
- Do NOT cough or sneeze into another person's face. Cough or sneeze into your sleeve or a tissue.

## What is meningococcal disease?

Meningococcal disease is caused by the type of bacteria called *Neisseria meningitidis*. This bacteria lives harmlessly in the nose and throat of a significant portion of the population at any given time (estimates range from 5% and upward). In a small number of vulnerable individuals, the bacteria, instead of residing harmlessly, invades the body. In some cases this invasion goes to the covering of the brain, causing meningitis. In other cases, it invades the bloodstream, but does not go to the brain coverings. There are a few different types or strains of *Neisseria meningitidis*. In the United States, types B, C and Y cause the majority of disease.

## Is meningococcal disease serious?

Yes. Every year in the United States approximately 800 to 1,500 people are infected with the meningococcal bacteria and 120 die from the disease. Also, about one of every five survivors live with permanent disabilities, such as seizures, amputations, kidney disease, deafness, brain damage and psychological problems.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of meningococcal disease may range from high fever alone to high fever, headache, or stiff neck. Not every person with the disease has a stiff neck. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, confusion and sensitivity to light. Later in the illness, a rash that looks like purple blotches or spots on the arms, legs and torso may appear. Symptoms may vary.

Symptoms can develop over several hours, or may take a few days. The incubation period can be two to ten days.

## How is meningococcal disease treated?

Treatment should be started as soon as possible. Most people with meningococcal disease are hospitalized and treated with antibiotics. Depending on the severity of the infection, other treatments may also be necessary.

## How contagious is meningococcal disease?

*Neisseria meningitidis* is spread through direct contact with the respiratory and throat secretions of someone carrying the bacteria, including close personal contact, such as coughing, sneezing, sharing drinks, kissing and being in close proximity for an extended period. To limit the spread of illness, you should avoid sharing cups, cosmetics, toothbrushes, smoking materials or anything that comes in contact with the mouth.

Fortunately, the bacteria cannot live outside the body for very long. So, this bacteria is not as contagious as the common cold or the flu. It is not spread by casual contact (e.g., shaking hands, touching door knobs) or by simply breathing the air where a person with meningococcal disease has been.

## Can someone be a “carrier” without experiencing symptoms?

Approximately five to 25 percent of people may carry the bacteria in their nose or throat without getting sick. This carrier state may last for days or months before spontaneously disappearing. Most cases of meningococcal disease are acquired through exposure to these asymptomatic carriers.

## Isn't there a vaccine for meningitis?

Yes, there is a vaccine for meningitis and New Jersey State law requires that all Princeton students living in dorms have received the vaccine. However, while the vaccine protects against most strains of the bacteria, it does not protect against type B, which is the type found in the cases at Princeton.

## How can transmission be prevented?

Practice good universal precautions, including hand and cough hygiene. Cough or sneeze into a tissue or sleeve, and wash hands frequently or use alcohol hand gel. Refrain from sharing drinking glasses, smoking materials, eating utensils or drinks from a common source, such as a punch bowl, or anything else that comes in contact with the mouth.

## Will frequent hand-washing lead to the creation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria?

Washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds is one of the most important steps you can take to avoid getting sick or spreading germs to others. If you are concerned about creating antibiotic resistant bacteria, use regular soap rather than antibacterial soap. There is no evidence that antibacterial soap is more beneficial than plain soap. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol.

The hand-washing soap available in University facilities does not contain antibacterial additives and the sanitizing hand gel is alcohol-based.

## If alcohol sanitizes, is it safe to share an alcoholic beverage with my friend?

Sharing anything that comes in contact with the mouth (e.g., drinking cups, cans or bottles) can lead to the spread of meningitis. Alcoholic beverages do not contain enough alcohol by volume to prevent the spread of illness.

The consumption of alcohol may also lead to decreased judgment about sharing objects that come into contact with the mouth.

## What should I do if I develop symptoms or I think someone I am with develops symptoms?

Students experiencing high fever or other symptoms of meningitis such as headache or stiff neck should be examined as soon as possible at University Health Services in McCosh Health Center. Faculty and staff should go to the ER or call their personal physician and notify Employee Health as soon as possible.

## Where can I get more information?

Visit the University's webpage regarding meningitis:

[web.princeton.edu/sites/emergency/meningitis.html](http://web.princeton.edu/sites/emergency/meningitis.html)

This webpage contains links to the New Jersey Department of Health as well as the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. If you have further questions, email [response@princeton.edu](mailto:response@princeton.edu).

## *The meningococcal bacteria is NOT spread by:*

- *Shaking hands*
- *Breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been*
- *Touching doorknobs, clothing, sports or fitness equipment*
- *Food*

**Students experiencing high fever or other symptoms of meningococcal disease should be examined as soon as possible at University Health Services. When UHS is closed, students with these symptoms should contact Public Safety and request transport to the ER. Faculty and staff should go to the ER or call their personal physician and notify Employee Health as soon as possible.  
UHS can be reached at (609) 258-3141.**