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Do you need the meningitis vaccine?

If you're in your late teens or early twenties, the chances are your doctor, school, parents, social media adverts or a load of leaflets at university have all suggested you have the [meningitis](#) vaccine – but do you really need it?

What is meningitis vaccine?

The meningitis vaccine, also known as the MenACWY vaccine, protects against four of the meningococcal strains of bacteria that cause meningitis – A, C, W and Y. "One in ten people in the general population carry these bacteria harmlessly in the back of their nose and throat. In teens however, where activities like kissing and sharing drinks mean it gets passed around more readily, one in four people carry the bacteria – which increases the risk of passing it on," says Claire Wright, evidence and policy manager from the [Meningitis Research Foundation](#).

How do you get meningitis?

Some elements of teen and student life increase risk of meningitis transmission. Meningitis isn't actually that easy to catch but activities that put you at risk include kissing, coughing or sneezing on someone in close proximity – such as at a gig, festival or club – drinking from the same bottle or glass, or sharing cigarettes.

If you're at university, or about to start university for the first time, you'll be mixing, maybe even living, with people from all over the country and the world, exposing your immune system to bugs it hasn't met before – this increases your risk of succumbing to them. This is why doctors particularly want teens and young adults protected against the risk by getting the meningitis vaccine.

How common is meningitis?

On average there are around 3,200 cases of bacterial meningitis a year; after babies, 16–25 year olds are the age group most affected.

Experts are currently worried about an increase in cases associated with a particularly aggressive MenW strain, called ST-11 – in 2009/10 there were only 22 cases in England, but this went up to 210 cases in 2015/16. Scarily, one in seven teenagers infected with MenW don't survive.

How to prevent meningitis

Having the meningitis vaccine doesn't just protect you. Because teens and young adults are the biggest carriers of meningococcal bacteria, they are also the ones most likely to spread it. "What we have found, therefore, is that vaccinating teens against a strain of meningitis bacteria causes rates of infection for that strain to drop in everyone," says Wright. "When the government started vaccinating teens against meningitis C in 1999, rates fell across the whole population."

However, in 2016 only 33% of eligible people had the ACWY meningitis vaccine so this 'herd protection' is not as good as it could be.

How to get the meningitis vaccine

How and when you get the meningitis vaccine depends on your age. Claire Donovan, head of information and research at [Meningitis Now](#) says, "If you're 14 or younger, the meningitis vaccine will be offered to you at school at the same time as your booster dose for tetanus, diphtheria or polio. A catch-up programme offers the vaccine to those up to 18 years of age. "

When and where you'll be offered this catch-up depends on your age and where you live. School leavers, for example, are being offered the meningitis vaccine through their GP and will be invited to attend their surgery or an injection site. Donovan says, "First-year university students under the age of 25 are also eligible for the meningitis vaccine but should contact their GP to make an appointment."

If you were born after 1 September 1996 and missed the meningitis vaccine at school for any reason, you are entitled to the jab as a part of the NHS vaccination programme; you can take advantage of this up to the age of 25.

How to spot symptoms of meningitis

Even if you have the meningitis jab, "it doesn't cover all strains of meningitis nor is every vaccine 100% effective," says Donovan. "To protect yourself and your friends it's still important to be aware of symptoms of meningitis."

Meningitis symptoms include:

- Fever.
- Vomiting.
- Drowsiness.
- Stiff neck.
- Severe headache.
- A dislike of bright lights.
- Pale blotchy skin with spots or a rash – don't wait for a rash before seeking help, as this can be a late sign, or may not appear at all

If you notice any meningitis [symptoms](#), call your GP or go to A&E immediately. If meningitis is suspected you will be given antibiotics to fight the disease – the earlier these are given the better. In some cases, people in close contact with you might also be offered antibiotics to reduce risk of infection.

Meningitis is often successfully treated – but it can take a while to recover from it. It seems the best cure really is prevention, so start thinking about getting the meningitis vaccine before going to uni.

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