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## How universities promote meningitis vaccinations

The new academic year is a time of freshers' weeks throughout the country, but it's also an extremely important time to encourage students to receive the meningitis vaccination if they haven't already had it.

Ideally this should be done before attending university, but if this wasn't possible then universities are advised to help encourage uptake of the vaccine amongst freshers.

### What is meningitis?

**Meningitis** is a rare, but serious disease that can be transmitted by something as simple as a cough, sneeze or kiss. One person in every ten carries the bacteria that cause meningitis (meningococcal bacteria) unknowingly at the back of their throat and nose.

Older teenagers are most likely to carry and spread the bacteria, but people of all ages can be affected. Cases of certain strains of meningitis have decreased in recent years; however, one type of meningitis, meningitis W, has increased markedly during this time. In 2009, there were just 22 cases of meningitis W in England, but in 2015, there were 210.

### What is meningitis W?

Meningitis W, although rare, can spread rapidly and cause serious illness in otherwise healthy children and adults. Currently, **one in three teenagers** that develop meningitis W die as a result of the disease. Early diagnosis and antibiotic treatment can help increase the chance of a full recovery, but vaccinations can help massively decrease the number of teenagers developing meningitis at all.

## **Why is the vaccination of university students so important?**

New university and college students are at increased risk of developing meningitis as they mix closely with new people from different areas, many of whom unknowingly carry the meningococcal bacteria themselves.

The early symptoms of meningitis, such as headache, vomiting and drowsiness, are also very similar to the symptoms of being intoxicated or having a hangover. This means that the symptoms of meningitis can be easily confused, leading to possible delays in diagnosis.

Rob Dawson, Head of Support at the Meningitis Research Foundation explains, "Meningitis and septicaemia are deadly diseases that strike without warning. Sadly we know too many families who have been affected by the Men W strain that's spreading among students. It's important for all eligible young people to get their free MenACWY vaccine to protect themselves, especially if they are starting university this year. University freshers are particularly at risk because they mix with so many other students, some of whom are unknowingly carrying the bacteria."

## **What are universities doing to increase the uptake of the vaccination?**

Public Health England (PHE) have issued guidance on how universities should help improve the uptake of the vaccination. This includes sending information out to students as a part of their joining packs, encouraging them to have the vaccination before attending university. PHE suggests that universities should be reminding students multiple times to encourage uptake – for example, when students register with a GP when reaching university.

Universities are becoming increasingly involved in advertising the importance of vaccination and helping increase uptake of this vital vaccine. In line with most other universities, the University of Leicester uses advertising to raise awareness of meningitis and to recommend vaccination prior to starting or on arrival at the campus.

Once on campus, students are targeted through posters, leaflets and electronic reminders on how to get vaccinated with the MenACWY vaccination and why it is so important. Staff from local health centres are also present on campus in freshers' week to help encourage uptake as well.

Other institutions are looking at using social media or even mass texting to make sure reminders reach all students. Student union campaigns and reminders on computer networks can help provide those much needed reminders as well.

## **Does vaccination awareness work?**

A pack from the Department of Health is sent annually to universities, asking them to encourage uptake of the vaccination amongst their students. This was based on a large study carried out jointly by the University of Leicester and the University of Nottingham in September 2015. They investigated how awareness campaigns may increase uptake of the vaccination.

They undertook interviews to see if students had been vaccinated before attending university. If they had not been vaccinated, they were offered the option of an immediate, free vaccination.

The study showed that just 31% of students had been vaccinated before attending university. However, after a local campaign encouraging uptake of the vaccine, this increased to 71% of students having the vaccination, a significant boost in coverage. However, some unvaccinated students still declined vaccination, suggesting even more advertising and a national campaign were needed.

## **How aware is the average student?**

This is difficult to say, but with the vast majority of universities following the advice of Public Health England to send advice on vaccination to students before attending, most should receive some information. Based on the study in Nottingham and Leicester, though, universities need to be doing more to target students once they reach university as well to encourage uptake.

MenACWY vaccinations are free for all teenagers aged 14–18 and for first-year university students up to the age of 25, including those from overseas. They are strongly advised to everyone who is eligible for them even if they have previously had the MenC vaccine.

Dr Vicki Holtby, a General Practitioner from Worcestershire who regularly treats University Students advises, "Protecting young people from this potentially deadly disease is vitally important. Make sure you have your vaccination before you attend university or as soon as you can once your arrive." She also adds, "Early flu-like symptoms of meningitis are often ignored, and unfortunately those affected can rapidly deteriorate. People shouldn't wait until the rash appears before seeking medical advice."

It's easy for everyone to check if they are eligible for the vaccine by using Meningitis Research Foundation's [online eligibility checker](#).

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