Princeton students safe to travel despite meningitis outbreak: CDC

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Illnesses in N.J. and California involve strain not covered by currently approved vaccine, agency says.

(HealthDay)—Despite recent outbreaks of bacterial meningitis at Princeton University and the University of California, Santa Barbara, U.S. heath officials said Monday that students are safe to travel home for the Thanksgiving break.

At Princeton, there have been seven confirmed cases and one additional case now under study. At UCSB, three cases have been confirmed so far, according to experts at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There have been no fatalities from these outbreaks, but there have been some very serious cases," CDC medical officer Dr. Amanda Cohn said

during an afternoon press conference.

Despite the outbreaks, Cohn said, there is no need for students from these schools or their families to change Thanksgiving plans.

"CDC does not recommend curtailing social interactions or canceling travel plans as a preventative measure," she said. "Instead, we want to remind students from these universities to remain vigilant and watch for symptoms, seek treatment. Also [health care] providers should be aware of the situation."

Both outbreaks of meningococcal disease involve the so-called B strain, for which there is no approved vaccine licensed in the United States. A new vaccine against the B strain of the disease is licensed in Europe and Australia, Cohn said, and the CDC and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have agreed to allow its use in Princeton to prevent further spread of the outbreak.

Final steps to permit its use in the United States are ongoing, and it's hoped that vaccinations can begin after Thanksgiving, Cohn said. The company that makes the vaccine hasn't sought its approval in the United States, and is instead looking to have a vaccine approved that covers all strains of meningococcal disease—including the B strain.

Cohn stressed that meningitis isn't a particularly easy disease for people to catch. That's because meningitis bacteria are hard to spread and don't survive long outside the body. "They are spread through the exchange of respiratory secretions," Cohn said. "So, they spread through close contact, such as household contact or 'French' kissing."

The bacteria cannot be spread by simply being in the same room with someone who is infected or handling items they have touched, Cohn added. People who may have been exposed to someone with meningitis

are typically given antibiotics to prevent the possibility of developing the disease.

Right now, many American adolescents get shots against the C, Y, A and W strains of the disease. Cohn said that vaccine coverage for these strains is currently very high at both of the affected universities.

Overall, fewer than 1,000 cases of meningitis are seen each year in the United States, she said. "In 2012, about 500 cases were reported," Cohn said. "We do see a couple of outbreaks each year." Most outbreaks occur in schools or organizations.

Since the 1990s, cases have been dropping because of the increased vaccination rate, Cohn said. In those years, there were typically 3,000 cases a year.

Bacterial meningitis can be deadly. About 10 percent to 15 percent of people who get sick die, and about 15 percent of survivors have long-term disabilities. These include the loss of arms or legs, deafness, nervous system problems or brain damage, Cohn said.

Immediate treatment is essential to prevent these consequences, but it is often difficult to diagnose meningitis, because the early symptoms are so similar to flu, she said.

Signs and symptoms of meningitis include high fever, headache and stiff neck.

"When we say headache, it's among the worst headache that somebody has had in their life. And with a stiff neck, they really can't move their neck. For example, they can't touch their chin to their chest," Cohn explained. Other symptoms include nausea and vomiting, sensitivity to light, exhaustion, confusion and sometimes a rash, she said.

More information: For more on bacterial meningitis, visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.