

Princeton U. to give students meningitis B vaccine (Update 2)

November 18 2013, by Geoff Mulvihill



Martin A. Mbugua, Princeton University Director of Media Relations and university spokesperson, stands in a classroom in Robertson Hall following a media briefing on the school's plans for dealing with a meningitis outbreak on campus Monday Nov. 18, 2013 in Princeton, N.J. (AP Photo/The Trentonian, Jackie Schear)

Princeton University officials decided Monday to make available a meningitis vaccine that hasn't been approved in the U.S. to stop the spread of the sometimes deadly disease on campus.

The university said doses of the vaccine for the type B meningococcal bacteria are to be available in December for undergraduate students, graduate students who live in dorms and university employees who have sickle cell disease and other medical conditions that make them less likely to be able to fight meningitis because of their weakened immune systems. Follow-up doses then will be available in February.

The university said the plan was recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The vaccinations are to be paid for by the university and aren't mandatory. Officials say they're most effective in two doses.

Since March, seven cases of meningitis have been confirmed on the New Jersey campus with six students and a visitor diagnosed, the most recent last week. None of the cases has been fatal.

Last week, the federal Food and Drug Administration approved importing the vaccine, Bexsero, for possible use at the Ivy League university. Princeton spokesman Martin Mbugua said university officials considered a number of factors before deciding to move ahead with the plan, but he declined to say what those factors were.



Princeton University staff members gather in an amphitheater-style classroom, or "bowl" in Robertson Hall following a media briefing on the school's plans for dealing with a meningitis outbreak on campus Monday, Nov. 18, 2013 in Princeton, N.J. (AP Photo/The Trentonian, Jackie Schear)

The CDC says the outbreak at Princeton is the first in the world since the vaccine against the type B meningococcal bacteria was approved in Europe and Australia this year, the only one for use against the strain. The vaccine is in the approval process in the U.S.

Bacterial meningitis is a disease that can cause swelling of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. It's fairly rare in the United States, but those who get it develop symptoms quickly and can die in a couple of days. Survivors can suffer mental disabilities, hearing loss and paralysis.

The B strain is among the most common in Europe and has been found

frequently in the U.S. Last year it accounted for 160 of the 480 meningitis cases in the U.S. tallied by the CDC. About one in 10 young adults with the strain dies. One in five develops a permanent disability.

Under New Jersey law, students who live in dorms must have vaccinations against other strains of meningitis. But a different type of vaccine is needed for type B, said Prithish Tosh, a Mayo Clinic researcher who develops vaccines. He said Bexsero, sold by Novartis, has had good results.

"Since there is a product available," he said, "it makes a lot of sense of me if the public health authorities go for it."

Meningitis can be spread through kissing, coughing or lengthy contact. Campuses, with their concentration of young adults in close quarters, make dangerous breeding grounds for the bacteria.

Princeton University told students to wash their hands, cover their mouths when coughing and not share items such as drinking glasses and eating utensils.

On campus, students were mostly calm about the possibility of being given a not-yet-approved vaccine.

Mulvihill reported from Trenton.

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