

Officials urge meningitis shots at University of Oregon (Update)

March 19 2015, by Jeff Barnard



In this Feb. 27, 2015 file photo, a public service announcement, encouraging students to get a vaccination against meningitis during a clinic that starts next week, plays on a television screen in the Fishbowl on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, Ore. Public health officials have confirmed a sixth case in the outbreak of the contagious bacterial disease that has killed one student at the University of Oregon. A drive to get students vaccinated is less than halfway to its goal, and public health officials issued a plea Thursday, March 19, 2015, for parents to get students vaccinated during spring break next week. (AP Photo/The Register-Guard, Chris Pietsch, File)

More than half of the undergraduates at the University of Oregon have not been vaccinated against meningitis, despite the fact that one student has died and five others have been sickened since January.

Public health officials are appealing to parents to get the job done during spring break.

HOW MANY STUDENTS REMAIN UNVACCINATED?

About 13,000 of the university's 22,000 undergraduates, considered at highest risk for the disease, have yet to be vaccinated.

WHAT'S THE SCHOOL DOING?

Around campus there are posters featuring smiling student athletes showing off the arm where they were vaccinated and sporting a green or gold adhesive bandage with the school logo.

In early March, vaccinations were offered at the university's basketball arena, and students are now being urged to go to local pharmacies. Emails have been sent to parents. The university has worked with insurance companies to make sure the vaccinations are covered. Vaccines, which cost about \$170 each, have been donated for students without insurance.

Students are being offered two different types of new vaccines that target the B strain of meningococcal disease, which can rapidly develop into a blood infection, or meningitis, which infects the lining of the brain or spinal cord. One vaccine offers two shots over a month. The other offers three shots over six months.

Students who have been in close contact with those who came down with the disease are given an antibiotic to kill bacteria that may be currently

in their nasal passages.

WHY SO MANY HOLDOUTS?

A university official said the administration is working to overcome young people's tendency to ignore preventative health care. The meningitis vaccine is not mandatory.



In this March 2, 2015 file photo, pharmacist Jenna Wright administers the Meningitis B vaccine to University of Oregon freshman Drew Russert during a mass vaccination clinic at Matthew Knight Arena in Eugene, Ore. Public health officials have confirmed a sixth case in the outbreak of the contagious bacterial disease that has killed one student at the University of Oregon. A drive to get students vaccinated is less than halfway to its goal, and public health officials issued a plea Thursday, March 19, 2015, for parents to get students vaccinated during spring break next week. (AP Photo/The Register-Guard, Brian Davies, File)

"We expect this is going to take time to continue to have a steady increase in the number of students vaccinated on our campus," university spokeswoman Julie Brown said.

OUTBREAKS OFTEN AFFECT THE YOUNG

Meningococcal disease is rare, with 1,000 to 2,000 cases per year among the U.S. population of 300 million people. But it tends to erupt in outbreaks among young people under stress in a new place, such as college campuses and military boot camp, where they are exposed to diseases for which they have no immunity, said Dr. Patrick Luedtke, Lane County public health officer.

Between 7 and 10 percent of people who get the disease die, and about a third will have long-lasting damage, such as deafness, seizures, and amputations, he added.

The latest case at Oregon is a 20-year-old sophomore man who lives off campus, and he went to an outpatient clinic with flu-like symptoms. There have been six cases since Jan. 13. One has died, an 18-year-old freshman woman on the acrobatics and tumbling team.

OFFICIAL FRUSTRATION

"It is not possible to have been on the University of Oregon campus the last several weeks and not know there are meningococcal cases," Dr. Paul Cieslak, director of infectious diseases for the Oregon Public Health Division, said Thursday in Portland, Oregon. "And the vaccine is available. Messaging is ubiquitous. Yet there are 13,000 students who didn't get vaccinated."

Cieslak said hundreds or even thousands of students have likely been exposed, though only some will come down with the disease.

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