

# Health advocates urge incoming college students to get new meningitis vaccine

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As young adults head off to college and into close quarters with others in dorms, cafeterias and classrooms, health advocates urge students and their parents to consider a new vaccine that may not be on their radar.

The meningitis B vaccine, federally approved in late 2014, can protect against most B [strains](#) of the disease, which account for about 50 percent of all meningitis cases in [young adults](#).

Meningitis is a highly contagious bacterial disease that starts with flu-like symptoms of fever, fatigue and body aches. Teenagers and college students living in close quarters are high-risk groups for the disease. It can be spread by sharing things like cups, utensils, cigarettes and lipstick.

It can be treated with antibiotics if caught early, but can escalate quickly to swelling of the brain and spinal cord. While only about 1,000 people in the U.S. get meningitis each year, it leads to death in 10 percent to 15 percent of cases and can cause permanent brain damage, hearing loss and loss of limbs.

"It takes so little to be protected against it and the effects of meningitis are just so devastating, so why risk it?" said Jill Thompson, director of strategic initiative at Generate Health, a St. Louis regional coalition of organizations and advocates working to improve health.

The coalition has created a toolkit to help area college and universities

educate students about meningitis, which includes sample letters to parents and students, informational graphics and social media tools.

"We do a lot to keep all those working in the immunization field up to date with this ever-changing field," Thompson said, especially in the area of meningitis.

Many families are just becoming familiar with the combination meningitis vaccine which protects against the A, C, W and Y strains. It involves a shot around age 11 and then a booster dose after age 16.

Missouri legislation took effect before the 2015-2016 school year requiring every public university student living on campus to get the combination vaccine.

Starting last school year, students entering the eighth and 12th grades in Missouri are also required to have the vaccine. Illinois started requiring it for sixth- and 12th-graders in 2015.

Now the separate meningitis B vaccine has been added to the mix. Because it is new, no laws yet require it, but Missouri legislation passed last year requires all public higher education institutions to educate students about the strain and the vaccine available to prevent it.

The Generate Health initiative is urging all students, not just those living on campus, to get both types of vaccines.

"If we can save lives or prevent any disabilities, I think we need to do what we can," said Deborah Artman, an instructor at St. Louis University School of Nursing who is helping lead the initiative by Generate Health.

Artman said she is requiring her public health nursing students this fall to create a student awareness campaign about the new vaccine.

Outbreaks involving the B strain occurred on five college campuses from March 2013 to February 2016, according to the National Meningitis Association. These outbreaks, at Santa Clara University, the University of Oregon, Providence College, Princeton University and the University of California, Santa Barbara resulted in two deaths. One student lost both feet, and some suffered neurological effects.

A University of Missouri [student](#) was sickened by the strain in February 2015.

Over the past 10 years in Missouri, 154 people of all ages have been sickened by meningitis, according to state health department data. Of those, B strains were found to cause 34 cases, but the strain was unknown in 40 cases.

Currently, two brands of meningitis B vaccines are available. Both involve a course of two doses. One requires a third dose if a person has been exposed to an outbreak or has other chronic conditions.

While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states all preteens and teens should get the [combination vaccine](#), it has yet to issue as strong a recommendation for the B strain vaccine. More research is needed to determine how long its protection lasts.

The guiding federal agency states those ages 16 to 23 may get the B strain vaccine, preferably between the ages of 16 to 18. But those who may have been exposed to an outbreak or have conditions such as a damaged spleen should get it.

Insurance companies may or may not cover the cost, which can range from \$125 to \$160 per dose if paying out-of-pocket.

Thompson said pediatricians are already suggesting the [vaccine](#) when

teens come in for their annual appointments.

"It's a deadly disease, and we want to protect our kids," she said.

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