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the health and environment
of the people of Colorado.”*

NEWS

Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment

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State Health Officials Recommend Vaccinations Against Meningitis

DENVER – Health officials with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment Tuesday stressed the importance of getting vaccinated against meningococcal disease, commonly referred to as meningitis, in light of the current outbreak of this deadly disease in Fort Collins.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices routinely recommends meningococcal vaccine for all people at their 11- or 12-year-old checkup. The committee recommends routine vaccination against meningitis for

- all previously unvaccinated adolescents ages 11 through 18 years;
- all previously unvaccinated college freshmen who will be living in dormitories;
- all individuals ages 2 years and older with anatomic or functional asplenia;
- all individuals ages 2 years and older anticipating travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia;
- any individual working as a microbiologist with routine exposure to isolates of *N. meningitides*;
- military recruits; and
- any other individual wishing to decrease his or her risk for meningitis.

“Vaccination is the best strategy to prevent meningitis. Good personal hygiene practices, such as covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze and washing your hands, also is important,” said Joni Reynolds, director of the Colorado Immunization Program at the state health department.

Reynolds said, “The vaccines are safe and effective and are available in many venues including private doctors’ offices, many chain pharmacies and community clinics. Most insurance plans cover the cost of the vaccine, and low- or no-cost vaccine is available through the Vaccines for Children program for children under 19 years of age through local public health agencies. The vaccine provides protection for more than five years. For those without insurance coverage, the vaccine cost can be significant, usually around \$150.”

The state laboratory has found that five cases of the disease since April are linked. These cases include three hockey players who played in an adult recreation hockey league in Fort Collins, a Colorado State University student and a student who was attending Metropolitan State College in Denver. Two of the hockey players and the Metropolitan State College student died.

“Because of the cases that have occurred in Fort Collins, we especially encourage CSU students to be vaccinated,” said Dr. Lisa Miller, director of the Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology Division at the state health department. “Larimer County Health Department staff has worked diligently to contact members of the hockey teams and other close contacts to provide precautionary antibiotic therapy and vaccinations against meningitis.”

Meningitis is transmitted through respiratory droplets and direct contact with the respiratory droplets of infected individuals. Coughing and kissing, including kissing ill friends, are common ways the disease is spread. The meningococcal bacteria attach to the mucus lining of the nose and throat where they can multiply. When bacteria enter the bloodstream, they travel rapidly throughout the body and can cause damage to many organs. The bacteria cannot live outside the body for very long, so the disease is not transmitted as easily as a cold virus.

Since June 18, no new cases of meningitis have been reported. However, people with symptoms should seek medical care immediately. Symptoms may include a high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, chills, nausea, vomiting, confusion or disorientation, sleepiness and a bruise-like rash.

When it comes to vaccinating teens against meningitis, Colorado lags behind the nation. According to recent data from the National Immunization Survey, only about 32.4 percent of Colorado teens had one or more meningococcal immunizations. This is lower than the national average of 41.8 percent. In contrast, 63 percent of Colorado teens had one or more Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) immunizations. This was the highest among all the states and well above the national average of 40.8 percent.

The National Immunization Survey began collecting data in 2008 and measures national immunization coverage rates for adolescents aged 13 to 17 years.

For more information, call 1-877-462-2911 or visit the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/meningitis/about/faq.html>.