

New Meningitis Requirements for Students

During the last legislative session, Gov. Rick Perry, signed into law the new requirement for students to be vaccinated against the meningococcal disease. This law is named for Jamie Schanbaum, a student at the University of Texas, who in 2008 contracted a severe form of bacterial meningitis called meningococemia. She survived but lost her legs and some fingers. The new “Jamie Schanbaum Act” requires new or transfer students entering college to get a meningococcal vaccine if they plan to live on campus.

The chief operating officer from Texas MedClinic, Dr. Gude, says that there are many types of meningitis, but the meningococcal form is extremely dangerous, fast moving and has the most potential for being fatal. For many survivors, the long term effects can be debilitating, possibly including multiple amputations, hearing loss and kidney damage. Meningococcal meningitis is most prevalent among U.S. toddlers, adolescents and young adults.

He also says that the disease is especially significant among college students. Studies show that freshmen living in dorms are particularly vulnerable to meningococcal meningitis. This type of meningitis is contagious and is transmitted through droplets and direct contact with infected persons such as coughing, kissing or sharing utensils and drinking glasses. Also contributing to the high incidence of meningitis among college students is living in close quarters, added stress with little sleep, frequent colds and exposure to cigarette smoke.

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Dr. Gude says that what is so alarming about the disease is that a person can be healthy one day and the next be deathly ill. Meningococcal meningitis is often misdiagnosed as something less serious because early symptoms are similar to the flu. The early symptoms include sudden onset of fever, nausea, vomiting, headache or stiff neck, altered mental state or seizures.

Parents should check with the teen's college to determine their particular requirements for the vaccination. For example, The University of Texas at Austin requires that the student show proof that the student received the meningococcal meningitis vaccination at least 10 days prior to checking into university housing.

As many as 15 students die each year from this disease, and in 2009 there were more than 50 cases of the meningococcal disease diagnosed in Texas, according to the Texas Medical Association. The Association reports that the disease acts so rapidly that about 11 percent of those affected die from it, often within hours of the first signs of symptoms – even if they have begun to receive treatment.

Dr. Gude would also like to remind parents that as of last year, students entering seventh grade are required to have a meningococcal vaccine, and this year it is required of both seventh and eighth graders. The requirement applies only to those eighth graders who have not previously had a meningitis vaccination.

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