MENINGITIS INFORMATION

College students are at increased risk for meningococcal disease, a potentially fatal bacterial infection commonly referred to as meningitis. Freshmen living in residence halls are found to have a six-fold increased risk for the disease. It is estimated that 100 to 125 cases of meningococcal disease occur annually on college campuses and five to 15 students die as a result. The American College Health Association (ACHA), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend that college students, particularly freshmen living in residence halls, learn more about meningitis and vaccination.

In addition, Pennsylvania law requires that universities prohibit students from residing on campus unless they have received the meningitis immunization or have signed a waiver stating that they have reviewed information about the disease and vaccines and have chosen not to receive the immunization. Approximately 70% of all cases of meningococcal disease in college students are vaccine preventable.

■ **What is meningococcal meningitis?** Meningitis is rare. However, when it strikes, this potentially fatal bacterial disease can lead to swelling of fluid surrounding the brain and spinal column as well as severe and permanent disabilities, such as hearing loss, brain damage, seizures, limb amputation and even death.

■ **How is it spread?** Meningococcal meningitis is spread by direct contact with infected individuals (for example, sharing a glass or cigarette, or kissing) or prolonged close contact with respiratory secretions (for example, sleeping in the same room).

■ **What are the symptoms?** Symptoms of meningococcal meningitis often resemble the flu and can include high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea, vomiting, lethargy and confusion.

■ **Who is at risk?** Certain college students, particularly freshmen who live in residence halls, have been found to have an increased risk for meningococcal meningitis. Other university students 25 years of age or younger should also consider vaccination to reduce their risk for the disease.

■ **Can meningitis be prevented?** Yes. There are two meningitis vaccines available at this time. ACHA, CDC with ACIP, and AAP now recommend the meningococcal tetravalent conjugate vaccine (marketed as Menactra) because it provides a much longer period of protection. It was licensed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on January 14, 2005 for use in people 11-55 years of age. The other acceptable alternative, if Menactra is not available, is the meningococcal tetravalent polysaccharide vaccine (marketed as Menomune). Menomune effectively provides 3-5 years of protection but must be repeated every 3-5 years if increased risk for disease continues. For most college students, one dose freshman year is adequate.

■ **For more information** please visit the American College Health Association website at [www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org) or the Center for Disease Control at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). You are also welcome to contact the Health Center with any questions you may still have.