

Students told to get up to date with vaccinations ahead of Freshers' Week

Students heading to university in September are being encouraged to ensure they are up to date with their vaccinations ahead of Freshers' Week to protect themselves against a range of life-threatening illnesses.

First year or returning students can be at increased risk of serious diseases such as meningitis, septicaemia and measles as they mix with large numbers of other students from around the country and overseas.

The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and meningitis charities are urging parents and students to ensure they are protected before the term begins as many of these illnesses arise at the start of the academic year.

The 3 vaccines students should get up to date with are:

1. MenACWY – protecting against 4 common strains causing meningitis and septicaemia
2. MMR – protecting against measles, mumps, rubella
3. HPV (for female students) – protecting against cervical and other cancers caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV) together with genital warts

Dr Shamez Ladhani, Consultant Epidemiologist at UKHSA, said:

We know that colleges and universities can be hotspots for the spread of diseases such as meningitis and measles.

At the top of any list of essential things to get for college should be any missed vaccines – it could save your life. If unsure check with your GP to make sure that you are up to date with the MenACWY, MMR and HPV vaccinations before term starts.

And all students need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia. Don't assume it's just a hangover or freshers' flu. If you're poorly make sure a friend knows and stay in touch regularly with friends who are ill. These diseases can progress rapidly so urgent action in getting medical attention is critical – call NHS 111 straight away.

Anyone who is unsure about their vaccine status can check with their GP practice to see if they are up to date and fully protected. Ideally, students should have any vaccines they have missed at least 2 weeks before leaving for university. If that's not possible, they should arrange to have any missed vaccines as soon as possible with their current GP or their new GP practice if they are moving to a new university.

The MenACWY vaccine is routinely offered to those in school years 9 and 10 but some students will have missed out. Anyone who has missed out can still get a free jab with their GP until their 25th birthday.

The vaccine provides high protection against 4 common strains that cause meningococcal disease (meningitis and septicaemia) – MenA, MenC, MenW and MenY – but does not protect against all strains, like MenB.

Although numbers of cases have remained at relatively low levels across the country, there has been a small increase in meningococcal disease due to MenB among young adults (60 confirmed cases in 19 to 22 year-olds during the 2021 to 2022 academic year in England) since the easing of coronavirus (COVID-19) social restrictions in July 2021.

The UK began offering routine vaccination against MenB to infants in 2015, but teenagers and current university students will not have received this vaccine so it is important they are aware of the signs and symptoms of meningitis and septicaemia so they can urgently seek medical care if needed.

Meningitis and septicaemia can develop suddenly. Symptoms include a blotchy rash that doesn't fade when a glass is rolled over it, fever, headache, aching muscles and joints and a stiff neck. The MenW strain can also cause vomiting and diarrhoea in teenagers and young adults. Urgent antibiotic treatment and hospitalisation are critical.

Measles is a highly infectious viral illness that can also have serious consequences. It can be more severe in teenagers and young adults, often leading to hospital admissions. Measles starts with cold-like symptoms and sore red eyes, followed by a high temperature and a red-brown blotchy rash.

Claire Wright, Head of Evidence and Policy at Meningitis Research Foundation, said:

Meningitis can kill healthy people within hours and is difficult to distinguish from a bad hangover or more common milder illnesses in the early stages.

By taking up the free MenACWY vaccine, school leavers are not only protecting themselves but also protecting others by stopping the bacteria from being passed on.

For those who have already been vaccinated it remains important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of meningitis because the free vaccine does not protect against MenB, which is the most common cause of life-threatening meningitis amongst this age group.

Michelle Bresnahan, who founded meningitis awareness charity A Life for a Cure following the sudden death of her son Ryan to MenB, said:

It's important to make sure that getting up to date with your

vaccinations is on your to-do list as you begin your preparations for university.

No-one wants to fall ill in the first few months and checking with your GP that you have these 3 vaccines is a quick and easy way to keep yourself safe.

Remember though, not all types of meningococcal disease are covered by the vaccine, including MenB. So it's vital you get to know the signs and symptoms, including a blotchy rash that doesn't fade when a glass is rolled over it, fever, aching muscles and joints and a stiff neck. Doing so could save your life or that of a friend.

Meningitis Now chief executive, Dr Tom Nutt, said:

It's vital that young people take up the opportunity to get vaccinated against MenACWY while at school. In addition, very few young people will have been vaccinated against MenB, which is the strain that causes the most cases of bacterial meningitis in the UK.

Although many young people will have been vaccinated against MenACWY at school, our estimates show that up to half a million under-25s may have missed this important vaccination. If that's you, contact your GP and see if you can get up to date with your vaccinations. This is particularly important if you are going on to higher education and university halls of residence. You can find out more information about the signs and symptoms of meningitis at meningitisnow.org.