Questions and answers about bacterial meningitis

January 23, 2014

What is bacterial meningitis?
Meningitis is an infection of the fluid of a person’s spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain.

How can you contract bacterial meningitis?
A person may acquire bacterial meningitis from an infected person through close, direct contact. Generally this refers to individuals who have prolonged contact of more than eight hours and are in close proximity (< 3 feet), or who have been directly exposed to the individual’s oral secretions between one week before the onset of symptoms until 24 hours after initiation of antibiotic therapy. Such individuals include household members, roommates, those who have shared drinks and intimate contacts.

This disease is not spread through casual contact like hand shaking or sitting next to someone.

What are the symptoms of bacterial meningitis?
Symptoms may resemble the flu, including high fever, severe headache, stiff neck, rash, nausea and vomiting. These symptoms can develop over several hours, or they may take one to two days. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion and sleepiness. As the disease progresses, patients of any age may have seizures.

What should I do if I am experiencing these symptoms?
Immediately contact your health care provider or go to the nearest emergency room or urgent care facility.

Is there a vaccine available, and where can I get it?
There is a vaccine available that may provide some immunity against the illness. If you would like to take this precaution against the disease, visit NAU’s Campus Health Services or contact the Coconino County Health Department or your medical provider.

The vaccine is available at Campus Health Services during business hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday. The cost is $130, and is covered by most insurance providers. Students can put the vaccine on their LOUIE account; they do not need money up front. Contact the Coconino County Health Department if you are uninsured and cannot afford the vaccine.

Should I receive the vaccine?
You do not need the vaccine if you have received it within the past 5 years. It is recommended that all college students receive the vaccine. If you have questions about the vaccine, you may call the Coconino County Public Health Services District or NAU Campus Health Services at 928-523-2131 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Is the vaccination safe? Are there any adverse side effects?
Visit the Centers for Disease Control website (www.cdc.gov) for more information on the vaccine and possible side effects.

Is this related to another case in Coconino County?
Coconino County Health Department reports there are no other cases at this time. The last case reported at NAU was in 2013.
Are you notifying the classmates of the infected student?
The patient’s close friends and contacts have been personally notified. Classmates and all NAU Flagstaff students are being contacted through email, social media and traditional media outlets.

Bacterial meningitis is not spread through casual contact, and the possibility of getting it through surface contact (tables, sinks, etc.) is medically insignificant.

Why is the vaccine not mandated by NAU?
Although meningitis can be a serious and life-threatening disease, it is relatively rare. NAU provides educational information to incoming students and their parents about the risks of meningitis and the benefits of the vaccine. Because of the rarity of the disease and the expense of the vaccine, the university has left the decision to receive the vaccine to be made by the student and/or parents.

What type of meningitis does the NAU student have?
It is strongly suspected that the student has meningococcal meningitis—a bacterial type of meningitis. Laboratory confirmation is pending. The serotype is unknown. It will be several days before that information is available. We will make a public announcement at that time.

Where do I get more information?
For information, visit the Campus Health Services at http://nau.edu/campus-health-services/ or the national Centers for Disease Control www.cdc.gov. NAU also has set up a temporary call center which can be reached at (928) 523-0007.