

# HEALTH

## Vaccine can help protect students against meningitis

Kai Beasley  
MCT WIRE SERVICE

Each year, students experience life on college campuses unaware that some of the world's deadliest germs are going through their college years too. *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteria are among those that cause meningitis, a disease that can wreak havoc in an unsuspecting college population.

In 2005, Ashley Lee, a freshman at Indiana University in Bloomington, was diagnosed with meningococcal meningitis, a terrible and life threatening infection that causes inflammation of the meninges, the thin tissue that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. Her case is the textbook example of the need to encourage or even mandate procedures for disease prevention on campus.

Young adults and teenagers are at increased risk of infection. Twenty percent of cases occur in people between the ages of 14 and 24.

The disease can be airborne, or spread through direct contact with someone who is infected.

College students — fresh-

men especially — are more susceptible to infection. Lifestyle factors including crowded living conditions, population diversity and increased instances of sharing beverages and/or utensils usually increase the probability of contracting the disease.

Meningococcal meningitis is particularly vicious and deadly. Initially, the symptoms resemble those of a cold or flu and can develop over the course of several hours, or even a couple of days. The symptoms include high fever, headache, nausea and confusion. (So, basically the same as a typical college hangover.)

Then we get to the really icky part. As the disease progresses, a purple rash may appear and skin tissue may begin to break down. In cases like Lee's, the infection resulted in the loss of her left foot, permanent scarring and the amputation of several fingers.

But Lee was lucky. The bacterial disease kills many of the people it infects.

Treating bacterial meningitis consists of the immediate administering of antibiotics. But the disease progresses very quickly, so

treatment does not always lead to a full recovery.

Sounds pretty horrible right? Well the good news is that there's a vaccine for it. That's right; you can usually protect yourself from getting it. One of the vaccines is called Menactra, and it's 83 percent effective in protecting against four types of bacterial meningitis.

So problem solved, right (at least 83 percent of the problem)? Wrong. One would think that with such a deadly disease out there, and with college students at such high risk, people would do something like make the vaccine mandatory. But that's not the case. As it stands, only 20 states require a mandatory meningococcal meningitis vaccination. And, according to the Centers for Disease Control, only 12 percent of teenagers got the vaccine in 2006.

Why is that the case? Well there are a lot of people out there who think that the disease is so rare, that there's no point in getting the vaccine. Maybe they're afraid of needles. Maybe they like a challenge, and want to see if meningococcal meningitis or, "the gitis" as it's been known in under-

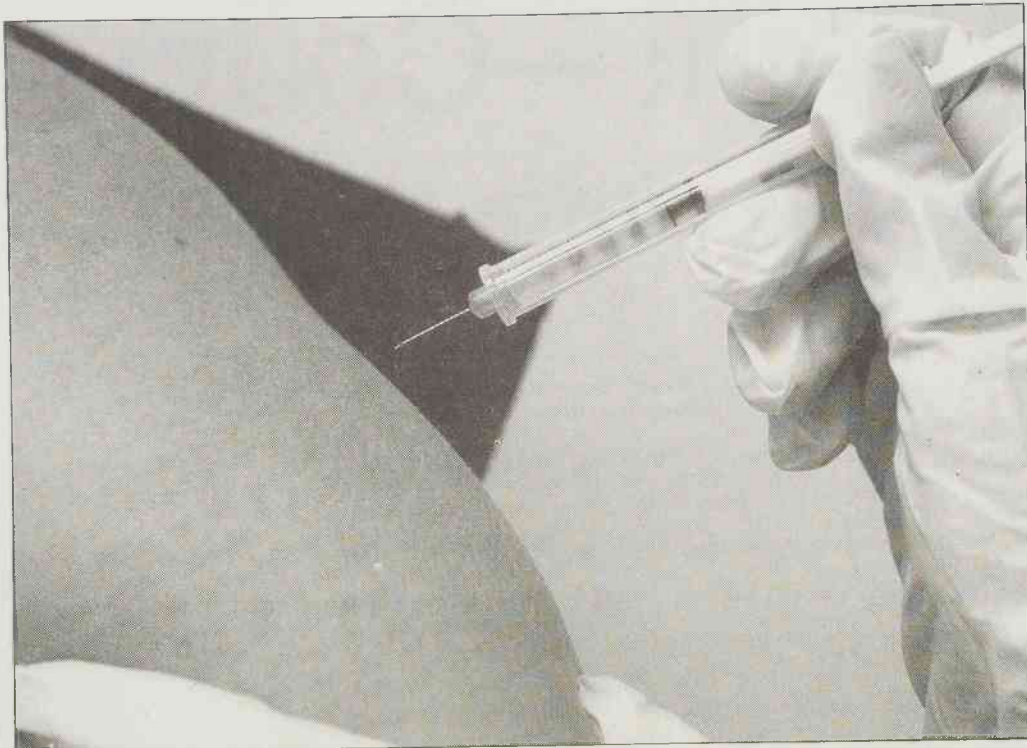


Photo courtesy of MCT Wire Service

Young adults and teenagers are at a greater risk of infection.

ground circles, is all it's cracked up to be.

The disease affects fewer than 3,000 people every year, but that doesn't mean that it's so rare that we shouldn't protect our young adults against it. Being struck by lightning is rare. Fewer than 800 people are injured or killed by lightning every year. But that doesn't mean that it's OK to

stand in a field during a thunderstorm.

Another argument is that parents have the right to decide what vaccines their children should and shouldn't get. Maybe parents should have the freedom to exercise a level of control over the lives of their children, but that power should be checked when their decisions can

affect the lives of not only their children, but others as well.

Many of these cases end in death. Why take a chance by not getting the vaccination? Why not push to make the vaccine mandatory in all 50 states? If there's one thing that Steve Irwin taught us, it's that sometimes, taking a chance can kill you.

## Better in Moderation

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Binge drinking refers to the heavy consumption of alcohol over a short period of time. The generally accepted definition of binge drinking is the consumption of five or more drinks in a row by men \_ or four or more drinks in a row by women \_ at least once in a 2-week period. Heavy binge drinking includes three or more such episodes in 2 weeks.

College students are more likely than other people the same age to binge drink. There are several reasons why some students binge drink. Being away from home and parental supervision for the first time, some students might think drinking is an expression of newfound freedom \_ even a sign of adulthood. Some students also use alcohol in an attempt to relieve stress and help them adjust to their new life.

Students may drink to fit in, too. On some college campuses, fraternities, sororities, and athletes set the social culture \_ and drinking is often encouraged. To feel accepted by these groups, students may become part of the drinking culture.

Also, liquor stores, bars, and alcohol distributors make drinking seem attractive and fun. Although they claim to be advertising only to people of legal drinking age, sellers of alcohol aim much of their advertising and promotional campaigns at students of all ages, particularly in college towns.

Besides hangovers and not enough sleep, binge drinking can lead to missed classes, difficulty concentrating, memory lapses, mood changes, and other problems that affect your day-to-day life. Longer-lasting risks include:

**ALCOHOL POISONING** This is the most immediate and life-threatening consequence of binge drinking. Alcohol poisoning happens when so much alcohol is consumed that the body's involuntary reflexes (like breathing and the gag reflex) are affected. If the gag reflex isn't working, a person who throws up risks choking to death on the vomit. Signs of alcohol poisoning can include extreme confusion or the inability to be awakened. Other symptoms include vomiting,



Photo by MCT Wire Service

College students are more likely than others to binge drink.

seizures, slow or irregular breathing, low body temperature, and bluish or pale skin.

If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning, seek help immediately by dialing 911. A person who has alcohol poisoning is in danger of dying or sustaining permanent brain damage.

**IMPAIRED JUDGMENT** Binge drinking impairs judgment, and drinkers are more likely to become drunk drivers and injure themselves or others (more than half of all fatal motor vehicle accidents of adults between 18 and 24 involve alcohol).

Risky sexual behavior can also have a lasting impact on students' lives. They may contract AIDS or another sexually transmitted disease from an unplanned and unprotected sexual encounter. Binge drinkers are also more likely than other people to be involved in aggressive behavior, including date rape and sexual assault.

**INJURY** People whose judgment is impaired by alcohol are more liable to participate in minor vandalism or get hurt because they do things they wouldn't do when sober.

**PERSONAL PROBLEMS** Binge drinkers are more likely to drop out. Drinking disrupts sleep patterns, which in turn makes it harder to stay awake and concentrate during the day. Binge drinkers may also be at higher risk

for depression and other mental health issues. And, excessive weight gain can be a bigger problem among those who drink heavily.

**ALCOHOLISM** This is a lifetime problem with serious health consequences, including an increased risk of liver disease, high blood pressure, heart disease, and certain types of cancer.

People with symptoms of alcoholism may: have a strong craving for alcohol, be unable to stop drinking once they begin, become nauseated, shaky, sweaty, or anxious if they go without drinking, need to drink larger and larger amounts of alcohol to feel good.

### IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

Most colleges offer counseling services for students who have drinking problems. Counseling can provide students with insight into why they are drinking and help them find better ways to cope with the academic and social stresses of college life. Support groups may also help students who are trying to stop drinking.

Don't be concerned that word of your drinking will be shared with parents, professors, or college administrators. Services you receive at the campus counseling center are covered under medical privacy laws, and your records may not be released without your written consent.

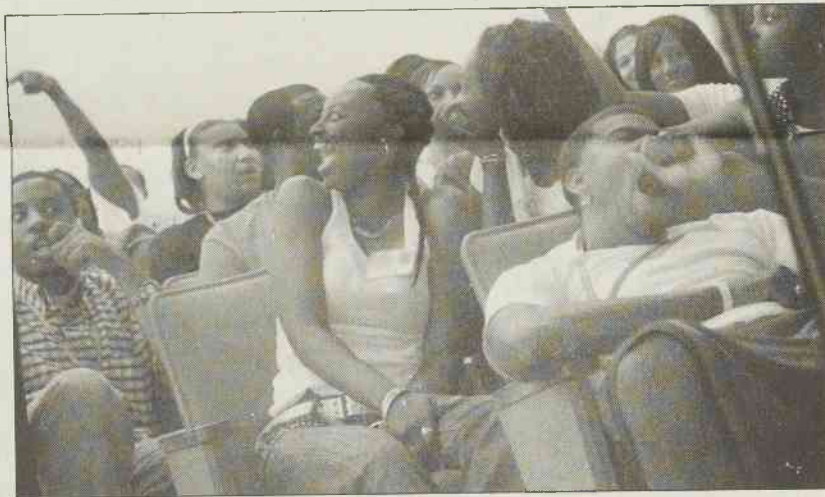


Photo by Garrett Garms

Sleep deprivation has serious side effects.

## Wake Up! You Need That Sleep!

Lydia West  
BLACK COLLEGE WIRE

Between class, work, parties and school activities, many students find it difficult to take the time to re-energize body and brain with the real food for the soul, sleep.

Failure to get in at least eight hours can result in dizziness, loss of energy and insomnia — all symptoms of sleep deprivation.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, not getting enough sleep or having sleep difficulties can limit your ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems. It can also lead to aggressive or inappropriate behavior. It can also contribute to acne and other skin problems, or cause weight gain.

It can heighten the effects of alcohol, lead to the use of caffeine and nicotine and precede serious illnesses such as insomnia.

Dr. Clarence Calhoun, a general surgeon and physician at Albany State University Student Health Services, said, "Students are often suffering from sleep deprivation and don't even realize it."

Vicki Philips, R.N., a family nurse practitioner who is also at Albany State University Student Health Services, said students who do not receive at least eight to nine hours of sleep are harming their immune systems.

"Too many extracurricular activities, along with college life pressures, are causing students to become sleep-deprived," Philips said.

Christy Statham, a 19-year-old business management major, said, "I don't receive eight hours of sleep

because I am involved in so much, and still feel the pressure to keep my academics up. There aren't enough hours in the day."

Yet some others force themselves to stay awake to party.

"Students in college socialize late at night instead of sleeping," Erica Whales, 18, a sophomore speech and theater major, said.

Failure to receive the needed eight hours of sleep can become a habit that affects one's circadian rhythm, the natural rhythm of the body. It serves as a clock that tells the body when to shut down and prepare for sleep and when to feel more alert.

Students who have a slower running circadian rhythm may not "wake up" until later in the morning or day, according to Calhoun. They may have difficulty concentrating, and feel a bit groggy or down during part of the day.

If your circadian rhythm is off balance, there are steps to get it back on the right cycle.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends awakening about 15 minutes earlier each day until you reach eight to nine hours of sleep. Avoid naps during this process. While adapting to your new sleep schedule, avoid caffeine, alcohol and other substances that can affect your sleep. Open blinds or shades or turn on bright lights as soon as possible after waking to help reset your internal clock. Avoid bright light in the evening.

"Once your circadian rhythm is on the right track, it is up to the student to go to bed at a reasonable time. Depriving yourself [of] sleep is only going to hurt you in the long run," Calhoun said.