Meningococcal Outbreak in Interior Health—Immunization Recommendations

Interior Health has declared an outbreak of meningococcal disease (serotype W) in the Okanagan Health Service Delivery Area (see map), among those ages 15 to 19. There has been an increase in serotype W disease across BC with 15 cases to date. The Okanagan has been most significantly affected. This year, Interior Health has identified 11 cases of meningococcal disease with several cases resulting in severe health outcomes.

Meningococcal infection is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing, close face-to-face contact, and activities where saliva is shared. Transmission can occur via kissing or sharing of food, drinks, cigarettes, lipsticks, water bottles, mouth guards used for sports, or mouthpieces of musical instruments.

The Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine provides protection against serotype W disease, and has been part of the routine immunization schedule for BC students in grade 9 since 2016. While the risk to the general population is low, immunization with Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine is being provided to those at highest risk. Interior Health is now offering Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine to all youth ages 15-19.

It takes approximately 10 days for protective antibody levels to develop following immunization. For that reason, the vaccine is unlikely to provide protection in the days immediately following vaccination. All youth traveling to the Okanagan can protect themselves by following simple infection control steps such as avoiding the sharing of water bottles, cigarettes, etc.

Routine and Expanded Recommendations for Meningococcal Quadrivalent Vaccine:

Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine is always recommended and covered for the following groups:
- All adolescents born on or after Jan 1, 2002 and who are in grade 9 or older
- Medically high risk individuals ages 2 months and older, including transplant recipients and those with asplenia

During this outbreak, the eligibility criteria have been expanded to include:
- Residents of the Okanagan ages 15-19 who are temporarily residing in VCH
- All 15-19 year olds who plan to travel to the Okanagan for 3 or more weeks in the coming months

Adolescents meeting any of the above criteria can be referred to public health for vaccine if they have not yet received Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine. While vaccine is not funded in BC for other adolescents, National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) recommends a Meningococcal Quadrivalent vaccine for all adolescents aged 12 and older in Canada. Vaccine can be privately purchased through pharmacies with a prescription or through a travel clinic including the VCH Travel Clinic (604-736-9244).

Please phone us at 604-675-3900 if you have any questions about eligibility criteria.