

Precautions urged against meningitis

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Recent outbreaks of meningitis at Princeton University and other college campuses across the nation have students on alert, but there are ways to lessen the threat, says Madhuri Sopirala, MD, associate professor of infectious diseases at the University of Cincinnati and a UC Health physician.

"Meningococcal [meningitis](#) is spread through saliva usually, through sharing things such as glasses, cups, water, or eating from the same plate, sharing drinks or kissing," says Sopirala. "In addition to causing severe neurological problems, it can also cause blood stream infection, sepsis and organ damage."

Seven students and one student visitor at Princeton have been sickened with meningitis since March and other cases have been reported at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, N.J. and at the University of California at Santa Barbara and California State University at Long Beach.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meningitis is a disease caused by the inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and [spinal cord](#) known as the meninges. The inflammation is usually caused by an infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Meningitis can be caused by bacteria or viruses or physical injury, cancer or certain drugs, according to the CDC.

There are five types of meningitis, according to the CDC. At Princeton, there are confirmed cases of the [bacterial meningitis](#) due to *Neisseria meningitidis* serogroup (type) B, according to the New Jersey Department of Health. No deaths on college campuses have been reported as a result of meningitis.

"It is a very serious infection of your central nervous system and it can cause plenty of damage," says Sopirala. "About 10 percent of patients can go on to develop serious symptoms. It can be fatal."

Symptoms include fever, stiffness of the neck, body aches, headache, nausea, vomiting, confusion and sensitivity to light, according to the CDC.

Sopirala says students at UC and other local colleges and universities can take precautions against the disease by simply practicing good hygiene.

Many tips are spelled out by the New Jersey Department of Health, which says students can do the following:

- Cover your mouth when coughing and sneezing with a tissue or sleeve.
- Clean your hands before eating, using soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub.
- Avoid sharing utensils, water bottles or other items contaminated by saliva or respiratory secretions.
- Practice positive healthy habits such as avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol use. Eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest.

The outbreak has not affected UC, but should be taken seriously, says Sopirala.

"None of the cases at Princeton University are directly linked to each other and have been occurring for several months," she says. "It indicates an outbreak that could likely go on."

Officials at Princeton University are recommending that students take a vaccine to prevent the disease. The vaccine has been given special approval for use at Princeton by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. It has not been licensed for use in the U.S. otherwise, but is used in Europe and Australia, according to the Princeton University website.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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