SUBJECT: MENINGOCOCCAL MENINGITIS

Each school year we experience cases of meningococcal meningitis amongst students in our district. These cases result in many questions from students, staff and parents. In an effort to provide accurate information about this disease and give our schools answers to some of these questions, the following information is being offered:

I. Information to Include in Staff Bulletins and Parent Newsletters:

- **Frequently Asked Questions About Meningococcal Meningitis and Septicemia**
  
  - **What is Meningitis?**
    Meningitis is a disease caused by inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. The inflammation is usually caused by an infection of the fluid that surrounds the brain and the spinal cord. Meningitis is also referred to as spinal meningitis. Meningitis may develop in response to a number of causes, usually bacteria or viruses, but can also be caused by physical injury, cancer or certain drugs.
  
  - **How Many Types Are There?**
    There are numerous types of meningitis, but the two main types of meningitis are viral and bacterial. Viral, spread by a virus, is more common and less severe and usually resolves without specific treatment. Bacterial meningitis can be spread by the bacteria meningococcus, or other types of bacteria, and is more rare and dangerous. The meningococcus bacteria can also cause septicemia, which is an infection of the blood stream.
  
  - **How Is It Spread?**
    The meningococcal germ is carried in saliva or droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected person. That means kissing, sharing food, drinks, cigarettes or other things that contain saliva can pass the infection to others. Casual contact or simply breathing the air where a person with meningitis has been, will not spread the disease. The infectious period is three to four days, and it may take two to ten days after exposure for a person to show symptoms. Humans are the only host.
  
  - **Can Anyone Get Meningococcal Meningitis or Septicemia?**
    Yes, but certain age groups appear to be more susceptible. These are infants and children under 5, teens/young adults up to early 20’s, and adults over 55.
  
  - **What Are The Symptoms?**
    The sudden onset of a high fever, headache and a stiff neck, are common symptoms of meningococcal meningitis. Those symptoms are often accompanied by nausea, vomiting, light sensitivity and altered mental status. With both meningococcal meningitis and septicemia, a purplish rash may also develop. The rash is a key indicator of blood poisoning, and it is vital that anyone showing this symptom go to a hospital emergency room immediately. People with septicemia may only have fever, malaise and the rash.
  
  - **How Is It Treated?**
    Early detection is the key to preventing serious illness or death. A number of antibiotics are effective in treating meningococcal meningitis, but the treatment must be started early in the course of the disease. This is why it’s critical for people showing symptoms to seek medical treatment immediately.
  
  - **What Should Be Done For People Who Have Been In Close Contact With A Victim?**
    There are antibiotics that can be given if someone has been exposed to the meningococcal bacteria. If there is evidence of the disease spreading within a group, such as a family, school friends, a sports team, etc., preventive antibiotics may be prescribed. Consulting with your personal physician is important to determine whether or not you need treatment.
Is There A Vaccine Available?
There are vaccines for persons 2-55 years of age that can prevent some types of meningococcal disease, including several of the most common types. Priority groups for vaccination include:
- Children aged 11-12 years old at their preadolescent health visit.
- Adolescents at high-school entry (approximately 15 years old) who were not vaccinated at the preadolescent visit.
- Children and adolescents aged 11-18 years who are entering, or current college freshmen who will reside in dormitories;
- Travelers to countries in which meningococcal meningitis is epidemic, particularly if contact with the local population will be prolonged;
- Persons who have HIV, or an immune system disorder
- U.S. Military recruits
- Persons exposed to meningitis during an outbreak

Several good sources of information on meningococcal meningitis and septicemia are:
Centers for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/meningitis/index.html (800) 232-4636
Meningitis Foundation of America: www.musa.org (408) 270-2652
Sacramento County Public Health: www.scph.com (916) 875-5881

II. Suggestions for Preventing the Spread of Communicable Diseases at School:

- **Universal Precautions**
  - These are precautions used in all situations and not limited to use with individuals known to be carrying a specific virus. In the school setting, those precautions should include: hand washing, using gloves, careful trash disposal, using disinfectants, and modifications of cardiopulmonary resuscitation CPR (using a protective mask).
  - It is critical that universal precautions be used in every instance when handling blood and body fluids because (1) there may be situations where we do not know that a person is infected; (2) we should not wait until we encounter an identified infected student or adult before practicing infectious disease prevention techniques.
  - The term “body fluids” includes: blood, semen, vaginal secretions, drainage from scrapes and cuts, feces, urine, vomitus, respiratory secretions (such as nasal drainage) and saliva.

- **Hand Washing**
  - Thorough hand washing with soap and water is the single most important factor in preventing the spread of infectious diseases and should be practiced routinely by all school personnel and taught to students as a routine hygienic practice. Please make sure there is soap and paper towels in all student and staff restrooms. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be used in locations where hand washing facilities are not available.
  - All staff, students and volunteers should wash their hands in the following circumstances:
    - Before handling food, drinking, eating or smoking
    - After toileting
    - After contact with body fluids or items soiled with body fluids
    - After touching or caring for students or staff, especially those with nose, mouth, or other secretions
  - Scheduling time for students to wash hands before eating is suggested to encourage the practice.
  - Classroom instruction about proper hand washing can be integrated into health instruction at all grade levels.

- **Student Reminders**
  - Please remind students to wash their hands often, and not to share food, drinks, personal items such as lipstick and chapstick or anything that has been in their mouth.
  - Attached is a sample poster you may wish to reproduce and place in restrooms, hallways and other key areas at your schools.