Meningococcal Disease Frequently Asked Questions

What are the current known cases of meningococcal disease in Santa Barbara County?
- The first confirmed case is a male UCSB student who became ill on November 11, 2013.
- The second confirmed case is a male student who became ill on November 13, 2013.
- The third confirmed case is a female student who became ill on November 18, 2013.
- We are conducting blood tests on other potential cases and will provide updated case counts as we know them.

All of the students are receiving medical care and treatment.

What type of bacteria is causing the meningococcal disease?
The laboratory confirmed cases are caused by *Neisseria meningitidis* serogroup (type) B.

Is there a vaccine against this infection?
The meningococcal vaccines licensed in the United States provide protection against four different serogroups (types) of the meningococcal infections (A, C, Y, and W-135). There is currently no licensed vaccine in the United States that covers serogroup B. As such students who have been vaccinated against bacterial meningitis may still be vulnerable to infection with serogroup B.

What about Bexsero®, the vaccine against Serogroup B? Will that be used at UCSB?
Serogroup B vaccine is not licensed in the United States and has not been evaluated by the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for safety and efficacy. Use of the unlicensed vaccine can only be done with the approval of the FDA. The approval process is complex and can take time. Santa Barbara County, UCSB, California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have already had preliminary discussions about the vaccine. Santa Barbara County and UCSB will be monitoring the situation closely and continuing to explore the possibility of vaccination. Santa Barbara County defers to the CDC on questions related to the Bexsero vaccine.

Is there a link between the cases in Santa Barbara and Princeton?
Although the Princeton meningococcal disease cases were also caused by serogroup B, there is NO LINK between the UCSB cases and the Princeton outbreak. This is not unexpected, as
cases of meningococcal disease can occur sporadically in college settings since this population has an increased risk.

**How does meningococcal disease spread?**
Meningococcal disease is spread from person to person. The bacteria are spread by exchanging respiratory and throat secretions during close or lengthy contact (for example, coughing/ kissing/ sharing cigarettes/ sharing cups), especially if living in the same dorm or household. Some people carry the bacteria in their throats without ever getting meningococcal disease. Since 10% of people carry the bacteria, most cases of meningococcal disease appear to be random and aren’t linked to other cases. Although anyone can get meningococcal disease, adolescents and college freshmen who live in dormitories are at increased risk. The bacteria that cause meningococcal disease are less infectious than the viruses that cause the flu.

**What can be done to prevent the spread of the disease on campus and in the community?**
You can help prevent the spread of illnesses by:

- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- Cleaning your hands frequently with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. Clean your hands before eating.
- Practicing healthy habits such as not sharing utensils, water bottles or other items contaminated by saliva or respiratory secretions
- Staying home when you are sick and avoid other people who are ill, if possible.

Research has shown that smokers and people exposed to smoke are at increased risk of meningococcal infection so avoiding crowded, smoky settings may be helpful. In addition, viral illnesses like influenza may increase the risk of meningococcal disease. Therefore, protecting yourself from influenza by getting a flu shot may be very helpful as well.

**What should I do now?**
Individuals should remain vigilant (have increased awareness) for signs and symptoms of meningococcal disease. These include:

- High fever
- Severe headache
- Rash
- Body aches/joint pain
- Nausea/vomiting
- Increased sensitivity to light
- Confusion
- Stiff neck
Anyone with the signs or symptoms of meningococcal disease should seek medical care immediately. Early treatment of meningococcal disease is critical as the infection can quickly become life-threatening. UCSB students and staff are urged to pay particular attention to this advice in light of the recent cases.

**Is there medication available to prevent infection?**
Sometimes, *Neisseria meningitidis* bacteris spread to other people who have had close or lengthy contact with a patient who has meningococcal disease. People in the same household, roommates, or anyone with direct contact with patient’s oral secretions (saliva) such as a boyfriend, girlfriend, and a sexual partner would be considered at increased risk of getting the infection. People who qualify as close contacts of a person with meningococcal disease should receive antibiotics to prevent them from getting the disease. This is known as prophylaxis.

**How are close contacts to the ill students in Santa Barbara being treated?**
People who have had close contact (e.g., living in the same dorm, kissing, sharing eating utensils or food, sharing drinks, sharing cigarettes, etc.) are being given antibiotics. The UCSB Student Health Center and the Public Health Department are working jointly to identify and treat close contacts with antibiotics. At this time, we have provided antibiotic prophylaxis to over 300 UCSB students.

**Should people avoid attending UCSB or participating in activities on campus at this time?**
No. There is no recommendation to cancel any activities or scheduled events on campus.

**Is there any test that can be done to see if I have been exposed to meningococcal disease?**
There is no recommendation to test people without symptoms who might have been exposed to someone with meningitis. If you think you might have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with or has symptoms of meningitis, call or see your health care provider. He or she can work with public health officials to determine if you should receive antibiotics to prevent infection.

**How will the recent cases of the disease be tracked and changes in intervention decisions be made?**
The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department, University of California at Santa Barbara, and California Department of Public Health leaders are in daily conversation monitoring cases of disease, close contacts and approaches to prophylaxis. CDC has also been consulted. If and when there are changes, there will be a timely, active response to maintain the health of our community.