March 25, 2013

Dear Students:

There has been an outbreak of meningococcal infections in Tijuana, Mexico beginning in January of this year. No Orange County cases related to this outbreak have been identified thus far, though cases that appear to be related to this outbreak have been identified in other California counties. Because Orange County students and their families and friends may visit Tijuana or come in contact with persons who have, we would like to provide you with the following information about meningococcal infection.

What is meningococcal infection?
Meningococcal infection is a bacterial infection that can result in severe illness or even death. The two most common types of meningococcal infection are: 1) meningococcal meningitis, when the bacteria infect the fluid and the covering of a person’s spinal cord and brain, and 2) meningococcemia, or infection of the bloodstream.

Is it easy to get meningococcal infection?
No, it is not. The bacteria are spread from person to person through direct contact with the infected person’s nose and throat secretions. Examples of this close contact include living in the same household, kissing, or sharing food, beverages, or other things that may go in the mouth. The bacteria are not spread by casual contact or by simply breathing the air near a person who has the disease. The time from exposure to the start of illness ranges from 1 to 10 days.

What are the symptoms?
Common symptoms of meningococcal infection include sudden onset of high fever, an intense headache, nausea and often vomiting. Rashes can also occur, with small pin-point dots, pink spots, tiny blisters or bruises. A stiff neck may occur in those who develop meningitis.

There are no changes in recommendations on travel to Tijuana or Mexico. But individuals traveling there should be aware of the recent reports of meningococcal disease and should promptly seek care for suggestive symptoms.

What do I need to do if I had close contact with someone with meningococcal disease?
Antibiotic treatment to prevent possible illness is recommended for people who have had close contact (see above) with someone with meningococcal disease. There is no recommended screening test for meningococcal infection if you are not ill. Preventive antibiotics are NOT recommended for people who did not have close contact with someone with infection.

Is there a vaccine to prevent this disease?
Yes. Meningococcal conjugate vaccine protects against meningococcal disease. Two doses of meningococcal conjugate vaccine are recommended for all adolescents 11 through 18 years of age: the first dose at 11 or 12 years of age, with a booster dose at age 16.

Each year, the highest rates of meningococcal disease are seen in persons 16 through 21 years of age, particularly college freshmen living in dorms. Meningococcal conjugate vaccine is recommended for those who are about to start college and got their first dose more than 5 years ago. For more details, see http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/vaccine-info.html. If you have any questions about meningococcal infection or vaccination, please contact your health care provider or Orange County Epidemiology at 714-834-8180.