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Dear Parent:

Stratford School feels it is important to inform you about the dangers of meningococcal disease, commonly known as meningitis, a potentially fatal bacterial infection that can strike teenagers and college students. The disease can come on quickly and may cause death or permanent disability within hours of the first symptoms, although rare the disease may be prevented through vaccination.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends routine meningococcal disease immunization at the preadolescent doctor's visit (11 to 12 years old). For those teenagers who have not been previously vaccinated, immunization also is recommended at high school entry and for all incoming college freshmen who will live in a dormitory (only one shot required).

Teenagers and college students have an increased rate of meningococcal infection compared to the general population, accounting for nearly 30 percent of all U.S. cases annually. Of those who survive, up to 20 percent suffer long-term disabilities, including brain damage, loss of hearing, organ failure and limb amputations.

Meningococcal disease can be misdiagnosed as something less serious, because early symptoms are similar to those of influenza or other common viral illnesses, including high fever, headache nausea and stiff neck. That is why immunization is so important. A conjugate meningococcal vaccine is now available that public health officials anticipate will provide longer protection against four of the five strains of bacteria that cause meningococcal disease. Although teenagers and college students are at increased risk for contracting the disease, up to 83 percent of cases in this population may be prevented through immunization.

I encourage you to speak to your child's physician about meningococcal disease and to consider immunization. For more information about meningococcal disease and immunization, you can visit the CDC web site at www.cdc.gov.

Sincerely,

Michael Blackburn