What is meningococcal disease?
Meningococcal (muh-nin-jo-COK-ul) disease is a severe infection of the blood or the meninges (the covering of the brain and spinal cord). When the infection is in the blood, it is called meningococcemia (muh-nin-jo-cok-SEE-mi-a). When the infection is in the meninges, it is called meningococcal meningitis. Both of these infections are caused by a bacterium called Neisseria meningitidis.

The bacterium Neisseria meningitidis has at least 13 different serogroups (types). Five of these serogroups cause almost all invasive disease in humans: A, B, C, Y, and W-135.

What are the symptoms of meningococcal disease?
Early symptoms of meningococcal disease may include fever, body aches, headaches, and feeling very tired or sleepy. Other symptoms that may occur are stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, confusion, light sensitivity, and rash.

How do people get meningococcal disease?
The bacteria cannot live outside the body for very long, so the disease is not easily transmitted. The bacteria are NOT SPREAD by casual contact activities such as being in the same work or school room as a person who is sick with the bacteria or just a carrier. The bacteria are also NOT SPREAD by handling books or other items that someone else has touched. No academic events (such as sports competitions or concerts) need to be cancelled to prevent transmission.

The bacteria ARE SPREAD from person to person through saliva (spit) or other respiratory secretions. This means that only people who were in close contact with a person sick with meningococcal disease are at risk of getting meningococcal disease and are candidates for prophylactic (preventive) antibiotics.

Close contact includes activities include:
- living in the same household or sleeping in the same dwelling
- kissing
- sharing eating utensils or food
- sharing drinks
- sharing smoking materials
- uncovered face-to-face sneezing or coughing

What can be done to prevent the spread of this disease on college campuses and in the community?
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands.

Washing your hands will help protect you against many different kinds of infections. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer rub. You should always clean your hands before eating.

- Practice healthy habits.

Avoid sharing utensils, water bottles, or other items contaminated by saliva or respiratory secretions. Avoid smoking and excessive alcohol intake. Eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest.

Is there a vaccine against Neisseria meningitidis?
There are two available vaccines in the United States to prevent bacterial meningitis caused by Neisseria meningitidis serogroups A, C, Y, and W-135. Students are routinely recommended to get this vaccine at ages 11-12, and then a booster is given at age 16 or after.

There is no vaccine routinely available in the United States that protects against serogroup B, which has been shown to be the cause in the majority of Princeton University cases. The serogroup B vaccine is available in several other countries, but is not approved for use in the U.S. Currently there are no federal or state recommendations or mechanisms to obtain this serogroup B vaccine.

Where can I get additional information?
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has some very helpful information:

- http://www.cdc.gov/meningococcal/vaccine-serogroupB.html

For questions about meningitis, contact the NH Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control 603-271-4496 or visit our website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.