

## **Inoculations give freshmen better shot at surviving the year**

by **HELEN BRANSWELL, Canadian Press**

With stacks of notebooks and ubiquitous laptops, teenagers heading to university for the first time are armed to learn. But public health officials worry their immune systems may not be armed to withstand the assault of freshman year.

They suggest parents check to see if a university-bound child's immunizations are up to date, and fill in gaps in a bid to stave off infectious diseases that can derail a school year - or worse.

"It is a good time to do it," says Dr. Ronald Gold, author of *Your Child's Best Shot: a Parent's Guide to Vaccination*.

"Since you have to get medical records going to college anyway . . . it's a good idea to review their immunization status."

At the top of the suggestion list for Dr. Gold and others is a shot to protect against one of the scariest ailments out there -- the rare but potentially lethal form of bacterial meningitis known as invasive meningococcal Type C disease.

"It's nasty," says Dr. Arlene King, director of the immunization and respiratory diseases division of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The disease strikes with stunning swiftness. A victim can be healthy at breakfast and dead by supper. The disease most frequently hits young children and teenagers, peaking at about age 19.

"It's fortunately a very rare disease. There are only a few hundred cases in Canada each year. But the danger of it is that by the time it's recognized, it may be too late to intervene in a way that can actually save a life," says Dr. Ian Gemmill, co-chair of the Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness and Promotion.

Experts are quick to stress the risk is low. In fact, there are only two or three cases per 100,000 people per year. But a high proportion of those cases are among first-year university students; those living in dormitories are at elevated risk.

"They're under a lot more physical [and] certainly emotional stress of being in college," Dr. Gold says.

"There are a lot of parties that go on right at the beginning of the year. Sharing drinks, sharing cigarettes, kissing et cetera, is an ideal way of spreading this germ."

Dr. Philippe De Wals, chair of Quebec's immunization committee, says although cases are infrequent, there's an unsettling chance of a bad outcome for those who contract the

disease. About 15 per cent die and another 15 per cent suffer serious after-effects such as amputations.

Dr. King says most provinces and territories provide a meningococcal vaccine free of charge to young children, but those programs have come into effect too late for the current crop of freshmen.

There are some exceptions. Quebec, which had a large outbreak of meningitis in 2001, had a mass immunization campaign that would have reached most teenagers in that province. Alberta also had a catch-up campaign during an outbreak there in 2000.

Parents who want their university-bound children to be vaccinated against this disease will have to pay out of pocket for the shot and any administration fee. Costs vary, but experts suggest that for many parents \$100 or less may buy priceless peace of mind.

Dr. King suggests parents should make sure their children have had the full series of hepatitis B shots before sending them off to university.

Most university-age teenagers in the country will have been offered those shots under publicly funded programs, she said.

Parents whose teenagers haven't had chicken pox or a chicken pox vaccine should consider adding it to their list, Dr. De Wals says. And he suggests a flu shot -- which won't be available till the fall -- makes sense for university students. (Those with egg allergies, however, cannot take this vaccine.)

"It's always a bad idea to get the disease at the time of your examination. So it's probably the most useful vaccine for students," says Dr. De Wals, who teaches at Laval University in Quebec.