

Students offered meningitis vaccine

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All high school students will be offered free meningococcal vaccinations starting this month.

The new Region of Waterloo Public Health program is part of a provincewide push for more comprehensive childhood immunization.

It's not related to the death last week of University of Waterloo student Patricia Vepari, who died of a meningococcal infection in her bloodstream.

"We didn't plan this as a result of what happened last week," said Jane Gianfrancesco, acting manager of the program.

"The timing is tragically coincidental."

But Vepari's death is a potent reminder about the seriousness of the bacteria, particularly for older teenagers who are more at risk, Gianfrancesco said.

The vaccine protects against the meningococcal C strain, confirmed by public health as the strain that killed Vepari.

Meningococcal disease, caused by a common bacterium called meningococcus, can cause serious illness, including infection of the lining around the brain, called meningitis, or infection of the blood stream.

Between now and June, free vaccinations will be given in school to students who are ages 15 to 19, born between 1985 and 1989. Students who turn 15 any time this year are eligible.

Additional clinics will be held later this spring for students in Grade 7 or age 12, eligible students attending private schools and youth in that age group who are not attending school.

Grade 7 was selected as a good age to start protecting children, before they're at risk for meningococcal infections. That age group will be immunized every year, Gianfrancesco said.

Eligible children can also go to a doctor for a free shot.

Youth who are not eligible this year, such as students who are 13, will be eligible for free vaccination in future years through public health clinics, or they can get the vaccine from their doctor now, but they'll have to pay for it.

"There just isn't enough vaccine to do everyone at once. That's why it's being done in stages," Gianfrancesco said.

Just last month, the Ministry of Health expanded free vaccinations to include meningococcal immunization for high-risk groups, including older teenagers and one-year-old babies. The babies get the vaccine from a health care provider.

The new program will lead to universal immunization for all youth, Gianfrancesco said.

In Canada, meningococcal infections are more common than polio, which has long been one of the diseases for which children are routinely immunized.

In the past, public health only offered free meningococcal immunization when there was an outbreak, as in 1997 and 1998, when 123,000 students in the region were given the vaccine after several teens became sick and two Kitchener teenagers died.

The vaccine used during that outbreak is different from the new variety that students will get now. The new one is more potent and is expected to offer lifelong immunity. The older vaccine only offered short-term protection.

People who received a shot during the outbreak and are still teenagers, and therefore still at high risk for infection, should be immunized again.

The meningococcal germ is less contagious than influenza or the common cold. Very close contact with an infected person, such as contact with droplets from an infected person's nose or mouth, is the only way to catch the germ.

Symptoms of meningococcal infection may include: fever, headache, nausea and sometimes vomiting, weakness and drowsiness, stiff neck, tiny spots or a bruise-like skin rash and young children may be sleepy, irritable or cry excessively.