

THE BATTALION

The threat of disease

Meningitis can indiscriminately strike with symptoms similar to the common flu

By SARA BURNS

The Battalion

Seventeen-year-old Mason Ott of Houston experienced some of the first symptoms of bacterial meningitis only 24 hours before he died.

After a normal day of playing in a high school football game, Ott had a fever and told his parents he was not feeling well. Twenty-four hours later, still suffering from the same fever, Ott became delusional and passed out. He could not be revived by CPR, and, by the time the ambulance arrived, he was dead.

"The scary thing is, when you just have a fever, you don't think you could have this disease, and then there's no time to catch it," said Elise Ott, Mason Ott's cousin and a junior biology major.

Meningitis is an infection that causes swelling of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. There are two main types of the disease: viral and bacterial.

Viral meningitis is more common and usually milder than bacterial. Symptoms include headache, low fever, stiff neck and sensitivity to light. People exposed to an individual with viral meningitis usually do not need treatment.

Bacterial meningitis, also known as meningococcal disease, is rare, but has

a higher risk of brain damage, severe amputations, problems with the nervous system and results in death for one out of every 10 cases. Severe disabilities result in one in seven cases. Bacterial meningitis requires early diagnosis and treatment because the disease can be fatal within 24-48 hours of the first symptoms.

The most common symptom is fever, which makes bacterial meningitis hard to differentiate from the flu.

Other symptoms include severe headache, stiff neck, extreme fatigue, vomiting and sensitivity to light.

Although most meningitis symptoms are similar to those of the flu, there are some symptoms that are particular to the disease, but not obvious.

Dr. Stephen S. Tseng, of Brazos Valley Internal Medicine, said infected individuals will have a neck so stiff that they cannot touch their chin to their chest. Purple lesions from blood poisoning and dead nerves may be present on the skin and there may be a change in the individual's mental status.

Anyone is at risk, but according to the American Medical Association (AMA), those most susceptible are people with immune deficiency, people with damaged or removed spleens, children under the age of five, elderly people and young adults from ages 15 to 24. Bacterial meningitis is highly contagious and can be spread through kissing, sneezing, coughing or sharing eating utensils.

College students are often highly susceptible to bacterial meningitis because they interact with hundreds of different people every day in classes and organizations.

Dr. Ann Reed, the associate director for clinical services at A. P. Beutel Health Center, said students who live in dormitories are four times as likely to catch bacterial meningitis.

Living in close quarters with an infected individual could easily cause an outbreak. Once an outbreak is declared, people in proximity to the disease are strongly encouraged to get a vaccination or start taking antibiotics Reed said.

Tseng said, "College students are more susceptible if they are around someone with the disease, or if their immune system is down because they are not eating right and having a loss of sleep."

"Students that smoke, consume high amounts of alcohol or do not get enough sleep have lower immune systems and become more susceptible to bacterial meningitis."

From 1991-96 the number of cases in young adults from ages 15 to 34 nearly doubled, according to information from the health center.

Tseng said students can help prevent meningitis infections by building up their immune systems.

"Good hygiene and nutrition can help to prevent meningitis," he said. "If fever is present along with one other symptom of meningitis, the individual could be infected and should see a doctor right away."

Dr. Samuel J. Barina of Brazos Valley Internal Medicine, said if students think they might be infected, they should report immediately to their local hospital emergency room.

Mason Ott did not get to see a doctor before his symptoms became severe, but his death could have been prevented. There is a vaccine to immunize people against bacterial meningitis called menomune. It lasts about three years, and it is the best form of prevention, Reed said.

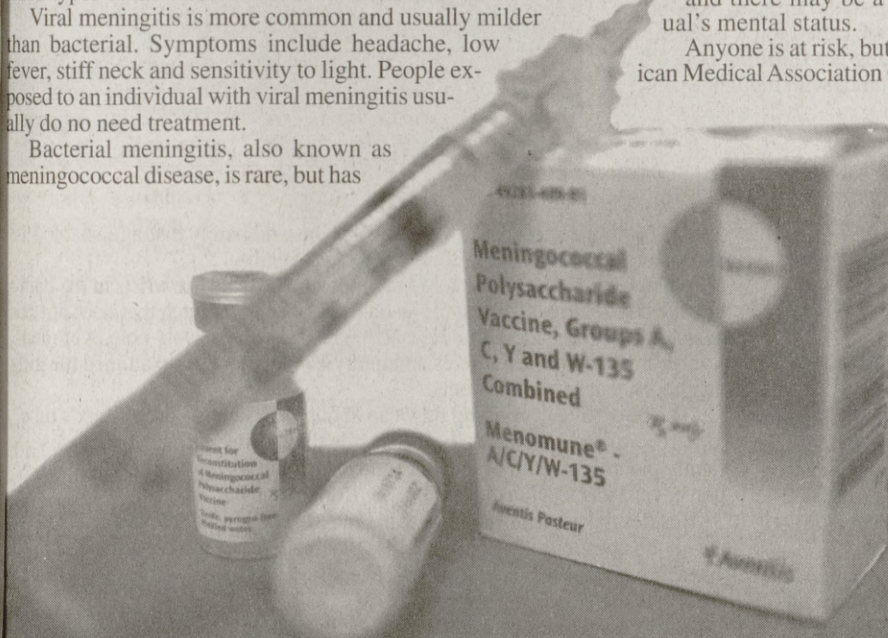
Currently, it is not required by A&M as a booster shot because the disease is so rare. The immunization is available at the health center at a reduced rate of \$59 for students.

If a person is thought to be infected with the disease, depending on how severe the case is, blood work is done, a spinal tap is performed or a lumbar puncture is performed to see if the meningitis is viral or bacterial.

The bacteria can live for months in the back of a person's throat or nasal passages without causing illness and then disappear. Usually, carriers who do not get sick build up an immunity to the bacteria.

Anyone exposed to an infected individual should take preventive medicine right away.

Treatment for those infected with bacterial meningitis are usually intensive doses of antibiotics. With early diagnosis, recovery rates are much higher. More information on symptoms, effects and prevention of meningitis is available at Beutel Health Center.



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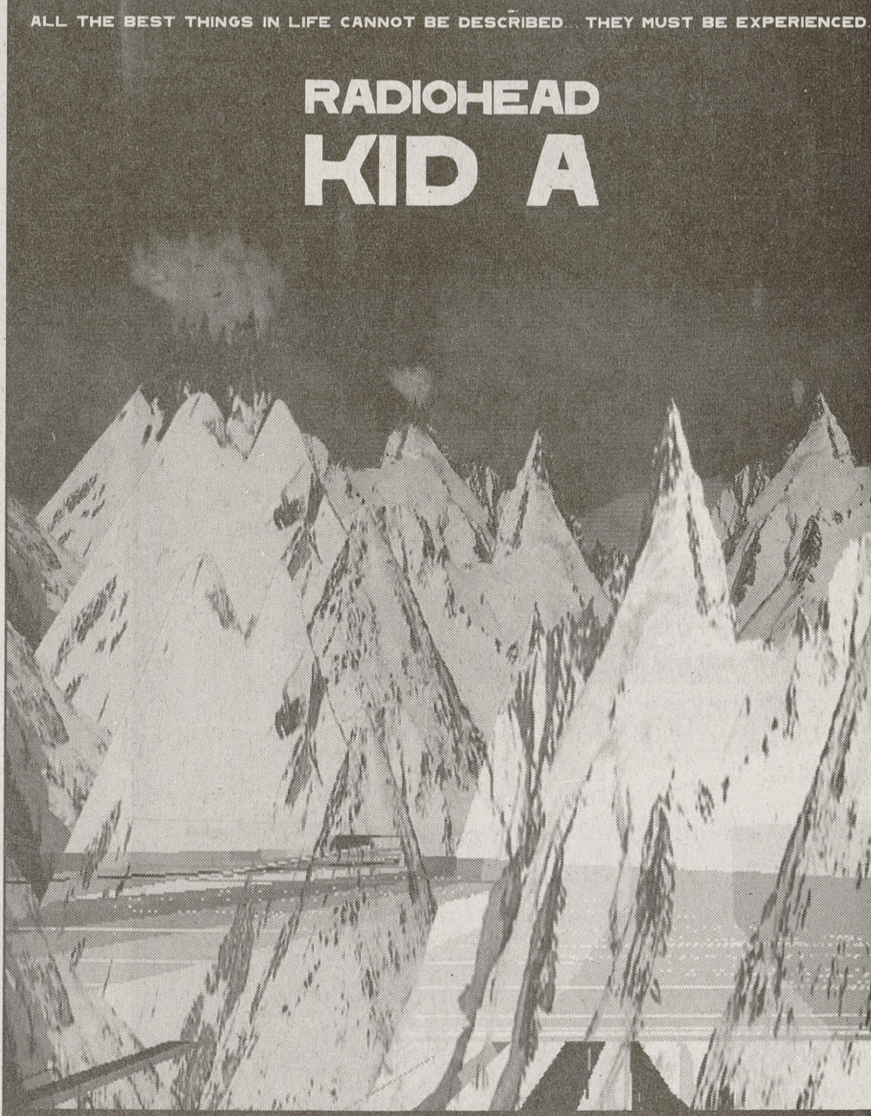
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