

# Vaccinations for People without a Spleen

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## What is the role of the spleen in my body?

The spleen is a small, solid organ, located in the upper left side of the abdomen just under the rib cage. The spleen's function is to store red blood cells and help remove "old" cells and other particles from circulation. The spleen plays a role in fighting infections in the body.

## What happens after a splenectomy?

After splenectomy, there is a lifelong increase risk for life-threatening infections. Although the risk is very low (less than 1%), you can take the following steps to protect your health:

- Get vaccinated.
- Keep a record of all vaccinations. If you have more than one health care provider, be sure each one knows. Promptly report any illness to your primary care provider.
- Wear a Medical Alert Bracelet, and/or carry a Medical Alert Card on you that states you have had your spleen removed.
- Notify your primary care physician that you have no spleen.
- Immediately report any fever or illness to your primary care physician.
- Take antibiotics prior to and 24 hours after any invasive medical procedure, catheterization, endoscopy, and surgery.
- Your primary care provider should periodically check your blood counts to insure that your clotting factors (platelets) are in order.

## What vaccinations will I need after a splenectomy?

Three bacteria for which you will be or have been vaccinated for that cause the most severe infections.

1. **Pneumococcus vaccine (Pneumovax)** is used to prevent infection caused by the pneumococcal bacteria. Pneumococcal infection can cause serious problems such as pneumonia, meningitis (infection that causes inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and the spinal cord), bacteremia (severe blood infection), and possible death. The pneumococcal vaccine is recommended for everyone age 65 years and older, persons who have chronic disease, live where risk for disease is high, have weakened immune system or have had their spleen removed. Re-vaccination is required once after 5 yrs.
2. **Haemophilus B** vaccine protects against illness caused by Haemophilus influenza type B bacteria (Hib). In adults this bacteria can cause life-threatening illness such as meningitis, pneumonia, pericarditis (infection around the heart) and septic arthritis (bone and joint infections). It is also one of the recommended childhood immunizations.
3. **Meningococcal vaccine** is an active immunizing agent used to prevent infection cause by certain groups of meningococcal bacteria. Meningococcal infection can cause life-threatening illnesses such as meningitis and bacteremia. Meningococcal is also one of the recommended childhood immunizations. It is also recommended for persons visiting an area recognized as having epidemic meningococcal disease such as sub-Saharan Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, northern Tanzania, New Delhi, India, and for persons trekking in Nepal. Meningococcal disease in Americans traveling in these countries, however, is rare. There are 2 forms of Meningococcal vaccine, Menactra and Menomune. You will receive the Menactra vaccine if you are 55 yrs old or younger. You will receive the Menomune vaccine if you are over 55 yrs old. If you receive the Menactra vaccine you will need a second Menactra vaccine 8 weeks later. Both vaccines require re-immunization every 5 yrs thereafter.

4. Patients who have undergone splenectomy should receive an annual influenza vaccine each fall.

### **What are the possible side effects of the vaccinations?**

- Most people who receive these vaccines will have no associated problems.
- Call immediately or go to the emergency room for: Difficulty in breathing; swallowing; hives; itching especially of the feet and hands; reddening of skin, especially around ears, swelling of eyes, face or inside of nose; unusual tiredness or weakness (sudden and severe); fever over 102°F.
- Side effects that do not require medical attention include redness, soreness, hard lump, swelling or pain at the site of injection. You can apply a cold compress wrapped in a towel to the site for 5-10 minutes if desired. Aches and pain in joints or muscles, fever of 101°F or less, skin rash, swollen glands, tired or weak (not sudden or severe), vague feeling of body discomfort.

### **When should I notify my physician?**

- Temperature above 100.5°F
- Significant increase in abdominal pain or discomfort
- Excessive redness, swelling, or drainage from the incision site
- Change in overall health; nausea, vomiting, chills, profuse sweating, diarrhea, constipation, or inability to urinate
- Notify your physician of any of the above symptoms no matter how many years it has been since your splenectomy

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