Not Another Gay Sex Disease

Deadly meningitis outbreak strikes MSM in NYC and LA.

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First off: Meningitis is not spread like HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. You're forgiven for thinking otherwise, based on confusing reports from the New York City health department. Last fall, it advised "men who have had intimate contact with another man through a website, digital application ('app'), or at a bar or party" to get vaccinated if they are HIV positive or live in specific parts of Brooklyn. Thirteen meningitis cases in 2012, plus four this year brought the total to 22 since 2010 (seven men have died). In March, the city expanded vaccine recommendations to include all men who have intimate contact with men. What does that mean, exactly? John Aravosis at AMERICAblog called the CDC for the details. Meningitis is an infection of membranes, called meninges, around the brain and spinal cord; some strains are deadly. It's spread through secretions in the mouth, nose and throat, which you come in contact with during deep kissing or when someone coughs in your face. It's not spread sexually unless you come in contact with the person's saliva.

After a meningitis death in Los Angeles following the White Party, that city revealed in April that four MSM contracted the disease (two died). But before November 2012, the city didn't track sexual orientation in these cases, so the true numbers remain unknown. Since not everyone can afford the vaccine, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) offered the shots in LA—giving out over 3,000 the first week. "The thing that connects HIV prevention with this meningitis issue," says AHF's president Michael Weinstein, "is that we can't rely on the health department. This comes down to an issue of brotherhood and community, of what we are willing to do to help each other protect ourselves."

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