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## **McGUINTY GOVERNMENT PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE AGAINST DEADLY DISEASE**

*More Than 180,000 Ontario Youth Immunized Against Meningitis*

**TORONTO** – More than 180,000 young people have been vaccinated against meningococcal meningitis since January 1, thanks to the McGuinty government's new free childhood immunizations, Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman announced today.

“We introduced this new immunization program to keep our children healthy and save young lives,” Smitherman said. “It’s off to a great start, but there are still many young people who haven’t been immunized. It is very important that they do, for their safety and to prevent the spread of this disease to others. It’s as easy as getting a needle, it’s free, and it can save lives.”

Since January 1, 2005, more than 180,000 children 12 years of age and youth aged 15 to 19 have received the meningococcal meningitis vaccine in school clinics. Prior to this, free vaccinations were only given during outbreaks. In addition, close to 400,000 doses of the vaccine have been delivered to doctor’s offices to be administered by family doctors to one-year-old children, adolescents and youth, and high-risk people of all ages.

Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes covering the brain or spinal cord caused by pneumococcal or meningococcal bacterial infection. It is contagious and can swiftly kill or leave victims with devastating complications. Meningitis can be spread through droplets in the air from coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread through saliva by kissing, or sharing things like straws, bottles, lipstick and cigarettes.

“Meningococcal meningitis can strike healthy young people suddenly and with tragic results,” said Dr. Sheela Basrur, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health. “We encourage parents to make sure their children receive this important vaccine either through a school clinic or their family doctor.”

The meningitis vaccine is one of three new vaccines that have been added to the list of free recommended childhood immunizations under the McGuinty government’s three-year, \$156-million program. The other vaccines are for chicken pox and invasive pneumococcal disease. The three new vaccines are saving Ontario parents approximately \$600 per child.

The government is currently running a print advertising campaign to inform parents about the expanded immunization schedule. The government is also running a series of youth focussed Internet banner ads on popular sites like Yahoo and MSN Messenger.

Ontario is a leader in North America in protecting children against vaccine-preventable diseases. The McGuinty government will continue to emphasize public health and illness prevention as part of its overall plan to improve health care. That plan involves healthier Ontarians, reduced wait times and better access to doctors and nurses.

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For more information on achievements in health care, visit: [www.resultsontario.gov.on.ca](http://www.resultsontario.gov.on.ca).

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