

Unprotected People #13

Hepatitis A

Virus saps grad in her peak weeks

The following article appeared in the daily newspaper, The Spokesman-Review, on June 7, 1998. It is reproduced with permission from The Spokesman-Review, (Spokane, WA) Copyright 1998. By Cynthia Taggart, staff writer.

Just thinking about how she got sick nauseates Allison Jester all over again.

"To know how I got it is just disgusting," the Lake City High senior says, cringing.

She's thin, hardly a presence inside jeans not designed to be baggy. She tires so quickly that her days are a series of naps. That's what hepatitis A does. It's cleaned Allison out and broken her down, scared everyone around her and changed her life. And she did nothing to cause it.

Sometime in March, food or water she ingested was contaminated with infected feces.

It could have happened in Seattle or Bellingham, where she was checking out colleges. It could have happened after golf team practices at any burger joint that offers immediate relief to gnawing stomachs.

It could have happened at a grocery store or even a friend's house. Allison will never know. By the time she was diagnosed three weeks ago, the virus had incubated inside her for two months. Tracking its origin was impossible.

When the virus reached maturity, it devoured Allison's liver like a starving lion.

As her senior year began to culminate in stage productions, golf championships, debate tournaments, academic projects and pre-graduation bonding parties, Allison fell ill.

It began with nausea, fever and aches, which Allison interpreted as the flu. She had a major role in the school production of "Noises Off" and willed herself to make it through rehearsals.

"I didn't want to give that part up," she says.

She forced herself through school, although she fell asleep in the auditorium during a special activity. She was so sick that she had to quit a high school golf tournament after the fourth hole.

By the weekend, her stomach refused to hold anything. Her mother, Patti, began to suspect hepatitis after she noticed Allison's urine was unnaturally dark.

Doctors didn't agree with Patti and gave Allison an anti-nausea shot. But Allison continued to vomit the rest of the day until dehydration became a worry.

"I felt like I was going to die," she says. "I had never felt so sick."

Her parents took her to Kootenai Medical Center's emergency room that night. Patti sensed her diagnosis was right when blood test results sent nurses scurrying to warn everyone about Allison's infected body fluids. Hepatitis A zeroes in on the liver, weakening it so much that it can't process medications.

There's no treatment. The virus has to run its course, which varies from weeks to months. Most people fully recover.

Ingesting fecal-contaminated food or water is the only way to catch the A virus, unlike the more dangerous but slightly less common hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B most often is transmitted through sexual contact.

Food servers who don't wash their hands after using the bathroom spread hepatitis A. Unwashed shellfish from contaminated water can carry the virus. Drinking water contaminated with sewage is another way to catch it.

Hepatitis A is so common that 152,000 cases are reported in this country each year. Forty cases already have been reported to Panhandle Health District

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through May this year, which equals the total number of cases in North Idaho in 1997.

The number of hepatitis A victims is rising so fast that public health agencies have launched a national campaign promoting good hygiene—the best prevention.

Allison's parents, younger sister and uneasy friends got immune globulin shots to boost their immune systems. Some friends panicked and stayed away from Allison. She tried to explain that the virus isn't spread through casual contact.

Doctors prescribed rest. Allison quit the play and her two jobs. School moved to her home. More than anything else, she wanted to compete in a national debate tournament in St. Louis, MO, on June 14. She was one of four students from Spokane and North Idaho to qualify.

"I was willing to give up everything to do that," she says.

Changing her senior project to accommodate her illness broke Allison's heart. She'd planned to photograph herself on a difficult rock climb in Post Falls. But she was in the hospital the weekend she scheduled the climb.

"I'll do that climb this summer for sure," she says.

Her appetite and energy are growing. She still wilts quickly beyond her house, but mustered the strength to march in Saturday's graduation ceremony.

"We've lamented that she's not been able to enjoy the last few weeks of her senior year," says Patti, who, like Allison, doesn't waste energy stewing over the unfairness of it all. "This is a special time of her life."

Allison will go to the national debate tournament, perhaps a touch more philosophical than she was before her illness.

"The hardest part was realizing I couldn't do everything I wanted," she says. "But it's made me step back a little. The little things don't matter. Things come your way you don't expect. You just deal with it."

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