

# Unprotected People #27

## *Haemophilus influenzae* type b

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### A tragic story about Hib meningitis

*The following story was contributed via e-mail by IAC EXPRESS reader Ruth Edge, RN, and is reprinted here with her permission.*

I have been a public health nurse in the field for the past 15 years. One of the families I met my first year as a nurse was a Latino couple who did not speak any English. Their little two-year-old girl had become suddenly ill and presented at the emergency room “moribund,” as the hospital notes read. She remained in the hospital for five months with meningitis caused by *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, hovering between life and death. She was finally released to her parents’ care with a shunt in her head. Within a few weeks, she was back in the hospital again due to shunt failure. She stayed for another month.

This spring that beautiful little girl will turn 18, but she has never had a chance to do what most teenagers do, or be what most teenagers are. She is unable to talk, or walk, or perform any activities of daily living by herself. Her mother—illiterate in both Spanish

and English—has cared for her night and day as well as any intensive care nurse ever could by learning about everything from medication administration to gastrostomy tube care and feedings.

All of this could have been prevented through a simple vaccination. Tragically, it was a year and a half after that little girl was first hospitalized before the Hib vaccine became available for public use in our immunization programs. The girl’s mother has diligently kept her other children on schedule with immunizations.

Whenever I give immunizations, I carry this special girl’s face in my mind. And if anyone begins to question the value of immunizations, I say, “Let me tell you about a young friend of mine . . .”

*Ruth Edge, RN  
Powell, WY*