

Unprotected People #33

Meningococcal meningitis

Ordinary college student shares horror of meningitis

The following story was originally published in the December 1, 1999, edition of THE COLLEGIAN as "Ordinary College Student Shares Horror of Meningitis," by Ryan Hockensmith, who was then a senior at Penn State majoring in journalism and a staff writer for THE COLLEGIAN. His story is reprinted with permission from the newspaper.

The doctor was squeezing my toes hard. I could see his face clench up as he went from toe to toe, tightening two fingers around each of the toes on my left foot.

To my horror, in the most excruciating few seconds of my life, I didn't feel anything. It's hard to express in words how I felt at that moment, how it feels to have someone grab a part of your body and not feel anything. It's terrifying.

That was the end result of my three-week battle with meningococcal meningitis, a form of meningitis that claims [many] of its victims.

I'm alive and well now, two weeks into a long recovery process. I will lose only those four toes I had no feeling in.

But I look back now and wonder, why me? How did it happen?

I was the normal, everyday Joe College Student. I slept the same amount as you. I ate the same, terrible, Taco Bell-heavy diet as you. I drank two or three times a week, but never a ridiculous amount. I didn't do drugs and I didn't sleep around. Yet I came down with a deadly disease.

Here's my story:

I contracted the virus in late October before really getting nailed with it while covering the Penn State-Illinois football game for the *Collegian* on Oct. 30. I developed a terrible headache during the game, and

my symptoms eventually got so bad I made a trip to an Illinois hospital that evening.

After receiving some medication and subsequently being released, despite a small rash beginning to break out and my migraine-like headaches, I returned to the hotel that night. I actually felt well enough to hop in the car the following morning for the 12-hour trek from Champaign-Urbana to State College.

The Illinois hospital never tested me for meningitis. I had no idea I was 12 hours away from a fight for my life.

We had driven for about an hour before my ankles started to ache. After two hours, they were throbbing. After four hours, I began to grit my teeth in agony. As seven, eight and nine hours of driving elapsed, I slowly felt my feet leaving me as the pain grew.

By the time we pulled into my apartment parking lot, I desperately wanted someone to cut my feet off. That's how bad the pain was. My feet hurt so badly I can remember having to choke down my own vomit as I was carried into my apartment.

My roommates and *Collegian* friends recognized something was seriously wrong with me, and immediately called for an ambulance.

Within minutes, an emergency medical team hauled me to Centre Community Hospital, where I was quickly diagnosed with some form of meningitis.

I underwent a variety of hideous tests I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy or even a Pittsburgh student. Doctors jabbed a large needle into the middle of the back for a spinal tap. A doctor took two separate needles and punctured each of my ankles to take samples.

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By this point, my ankles hurt so badly I was sobbing and screaming in the emergency room for about an hour.

I gave the nurse and doctor two options: cut my feet off or give me lots of pain medication. To my dismay, they refused to do either.

Pain medication could not be given because meningitis moves rapidly through the body and often makes a mad dash for the brain. To ensure the virus hadn't taken over my nervous system, doctors would not give me medication that could cloud my thinking and prevent them from getting a clear read on the state of my brain.

So I lay there and writhed in pain, grabbing my girlfriend Lori's hand and screaming. I knew something terrible had gotten into my body. I knew something bad was in there, like when I had food poisoning. But there was nothing I could do but wait.

Now I lay there waiting, but I knew this time was much, much more serious than when I ate that bad cheeseburger. I remember clearing the pain out of my head for just a few seconds to truly contemplate death, for I honestly felt that was a reality. And it was.

Eventually the Centre Community Hospital doctors decided to use Life Lion, an emergency helicopter, to transport me to Hershey Medical Center.

By the time I was loaded onto Life Lion late Sunday night, I had lost consciousness.

From that time until the following weekend, my family, girlfriend and friends went through the spectrum of emotions as I fought for my life. My mom, dad and girlfriend spent almost that entire first week at the hospital, sleeping on the floor of the waiting room or at my side.

They struggled Monday as my kidneys and respiratory system failed, forcing doctors to put me on a respirator. They huddled together and cried for joy on Tuesday when I was upgraded to critical but stable condition.

Then they continued to smile Wednesday as signs of improvement continued, only to be dashed apart by

a disastrous Thursday in which a potentially fatal heart murmur developed.

Finally, after being completely unconscious and on a respirator for nearly a week, I completely awakened Friday and began to breathe by myself.

By Saturday afternoon, I actually was able to witness Penn State's 24-23 heartbreaking loss to Minnesota.

I spent two more weeks in the hospital, including a week in rehabilitation where I learned to walk and use my hands all over again.

After three long weeks, I finally came home Nov. 19, just in time for the most meaningful Thanksgiving of my life.

Every day, I change the bandages on my feet and must look at the four charcoal black toes on my feet. I peel the gauze and medicated pads off, and with them come pieces of skin and ooze as my body heals over in the aftermath of this terrible disease.

It is truly gruesome, and I go through it everyday. My body is healing, but I have to watch it fall apart first, not to mention the four toes that I must have removed next month.

Meningitis only attacks a minuscule percentage of people every year, but a high percentage of those are college students. I am now a part of that statistic.

If I had spent \$75 and gone to Ritenour for a meningitis vaccine like I should have last year, I wouldn't have to look at my body and nearly cry every day.

Please make the most of your opportunity to avoid what happened to me. From 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Thursday in the Alumni Hall, go get this vaccine.

The price is steep and all shots stink. But the one thing that makes this entire ordeal worth it for me is to hear people say they got the shot. Please get it.

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