

Unprotected People #9

Hepatitis B

“I was at no risk for ever having hepatitis B!”

The following letter was written by a 35-year-old woman who contracted hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection. This mother of three children, like at least one third of people who contract hepatitis B, had no known risk factors for HBV infection. We are printing her story because, as she says, “I hope my story helps convince people to get their children and themselves immunized. No one should have to go through what I went through.”

The letter is as follows:

I am a married 35-year-old woman and a stay-at-home mother of three young daughters—ages 4, 7, and 10. I live in a small town on the New Hampshire seacoast. I’ve always been extremely healthy and active.

Last November 12th, I woke up and my joints were aching, especially my hips, knees, and ankles. I had just started an intense walking program, so my first thought was that I had “overdone” it. Each day, I felt progressively worse, and I finally made a doctor’s appointment after suffering for about a week.

At the doctor’s, I described my symptoms. He said that he thought my symptoms indicated “stress.” He took some blood work to rule out rheumatoid arthritis and sent me home with a prescription for ibuprofen and the advice that I should consider going on antidepressants to eliminate the symptoms of “fibromyalgia.” I felt devastated because I was sure something was wrong with me.

I continued to feel worse and worse every day.

I began to feel more nauseated and exhausted than I can describe. Worse yet, my doctor had made me feel that it was “in my head” even though I told him that I did not feel depressed and was under very little stress!

After getting sicker and sicker, I finally made another appointment ten days later. The nurse practitioner took one look at me and noticed how jaundiced I looked. Also, my stools had become pasty looking

and my urine quite dark. I thought I was just dehydrated from not eating for so long. She took blood work to determine if I had hepatitis and what type. I knew absolutely nothing about hepatitis at this point. I was just relieved that I had a diagnosis for what was wrong with me. She then described the ABC’s of hepatitis.

I immediately assumed that I had hep A because I am in a category not considered “at risk” for the other types. Two days later, she called back with the results that I had hepatitis B. I felt as if my whole world had caved in.

My husband had to be tested. During the two days that we had to wait for the results, I felt that everything I believed about my marriage had to be a lie. When the results came back negative on my husband, he had to receive immunoglobulin because I had potentially infected him. I then had my two older daughters begin the vaccination series (my youngest had completed the series).

During the approximately six weeks that I felt so sick with this infection, I was so ill that I couldn’t even take care of my kids. This whole experience was so incredibly demoralizing and humiliating. I believe that most people know nothing about hepatitis—I know I didn’t. If I had known that I had even the minutest chance of becoming infected with hep B, I would have run to my doctor’s to get immunized. I’ve never felt so ill.

I can’t describe how it felt to have to wait for six months to finally have the blood work done to rule out the chance that I had become a chronic carrier. No amount of reassurance from the nurse practitioner could convince me that my chance was minimal that I would be chronic. After all, I was considered at no risk for ever having hep B at all!

In June, I received my blood work results and the knowledge that I am completely recovered from

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hep B. I thank God for that. But I'm still dealing with the after effects of what I went through. My husband and I went to a counselor to deal with the stress that this whole situation placed on our marriage and how angry my husband felt because I hadn't trusted him. I feel sick at the thought that during the time of my acute infection, I could have infected my children or my husband.

This virus has such a stigma attached to it! I stopped telling anyone that I had been infected with hepatitis B.

If my story makes even one person reconsider and have their child or themselves immunized, then it will make me feel better.

Over one third of all people who are infected each year with hepatitis B are in the "no risk" category for infection. I'm one of them, and even a year later, I'm trying to put my horrible experience behind me. No one should ever have to suffer through being infected with this virus—it is totally preventable with a series of three shots. "No risk" living is a meaningless term. If you go to a dentist, borrow a toothbrush, get your ears pierced, get a manicure, or engage in countless other mundane activities, you could become infected.

I hope my story helps convince people to get their children and themselves immunized. No one should have to go through what I went through.