

Menacing Meningitis

by Guy Falotico



Courtesy of Lauren Leeber

You wouldn't know it now, but Lauren Leeber of New York was once very sick. She got sent home from day care on the day before Halloween, and by the next day, she was in the hospital with a type of the disease called *meningitis*, fighting for her life. It got so bad that she lost a hand, some fingers, and parts of her legs. Later, she needed a new kidney.

Although it's been years since Lauren came down with meningitis, she recalls enough from that time to know that what she went through was very difficult. "I would not wish meningitis on my worst enemy," she says.

What Is It?

Meningitis is a disease that involves swelling of the meninges, which are tissues that cover your brain and spinal cord. The disease can be *contagious*. That means it can be passed from infected people to others. Meningitis can spread through contact with fluids from an infected person's mouth or throat. For example, you may get the disease if an infected person coughs or sneezes on or close to you.

Meningitis is hard to diagnose because its early symptoms are similar to those of the flu. They include fever, headache, stiff neck, and throwing up. Rashes are also common. But if meningitis is not picked up on by a doctor quickly, serious problems—even death—can occur in just a few hours.

When meningitis is caught early enough, people have a greater chance of beating it. For example, take Kaeley Hamilton, of Florida, who was 8 when she got sick with meningitis.

"I had all the typical symptoms of the flu, but the fever was really high and made my mom nervous, so we went to the doctor," recalls Hamilton. "They caught the meningitis early."

There are different types of meningitis, but two types are more common. One, *viral meningitis*, is caused by a virus. There is no medicine to treat most viral meningitis cases, but viral meningitis is usually not as severe as the other common type. People sick with viral meningitis usually get better on their own. *Bacterial meningitis* is the more dangerous form, especially when it is caused by bacteria called *meningococcus*. It is treated with antibiotics. But those drugs can work only if the disease is caught early.

Meningococcal meningitis is rare. It strikes fewer than 5,000 Americans each year. Still, teens and young adults have a greater chance of getting the disease compared with many other people. That's because they are more often in crowded settings that can give this type of meningitis a chance to spread, such as schools, college dormitories, or summer camps.

Kayla St. Pierre, of Massachusetts, had meningococcal meningitis when she was 10. "One day I felt sluggish at school, and the nurse said I had the flu and sent me home," says St. Pierre. "The next morning I had a rash all over my body. I didn't know what it was, but my parents knew something was wrong, so we went to the emergency room."

Once she got there, they found out what was wrong. But the disease had already taken hold. Both of her legs needed to be *amputated*, or removed, at the knee. She lost a few fingers too. St. Pierre went through months of surgeries to repair the skin damage from the rash, and she was in physical therapy to strengthen her muscles.

About 15 percent of all of the people who survive meningococcal meningitis end up with other health problems, such as brain damage, kidney disease, or damaged arms and legs.

Fighting Back

The good news is that meningococcal meningitis can be prevented with a vaccine. Health experts recommend that most people between the ages of 11 and 18 get the shot.

Not everyone should get vaccinated, however. Some people have allergies to the vaccine's ingredients. But for almost everyone else, the benefits of getting the vaccine far outweigh the risks.

"The most important message is to get vaccinated," says Dr. John Sinnott. He is an infectious disease specialist at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Vaccination against meningitis is "absolutely essential," he says, "and one of the greatest advances in medicine."

Meningitis Signs

It can be hard to tell whether a person has meningitis. That's because the symptoms, or signs, of the disease can look similar to other illnesses. Meningitis symptoms are serious. They include:



Stiff neck



Headache



Fever



Light sensitivity



Drowsiness



Joint pain



Throwing up



Confusion



Rash

Jason Lee

How to Protect Yourself

The best way to avoid meningitis is by getting the vaccine. Here are some other ways to try to keep from being infected.

- Don't share water bottles, drinking glasses, or eating utensils with friends.
- Don't share lip balms or lip glosses.
- Wash your hands often, especially before eating. Use warm water and soap, and lather

for at least 20 seconds.

- Eat healthy foods for a strong immune system.
- Get enough sleep each night to help your immune system.

What Is a Vaccine?

A vaccine is a shot that prevents a certain disease. It's made with very small parts of the germs it was created to fight. The vaccine teaches your body how to fight the disease for itself. Some types of vaccines need only one shot to protect you for the rest of your life. Other types, such as the one for seasonal flu, change from year to year and need to be given annually.



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