

Kathy Huddleson

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Mother of Elizabeth, Who Died of Meningococcal Disease

Kathy Huddleson of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, had never heard of meningococcal disease and never suspected such a rare, yet potentially fatal, disease could strike her 20-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, a junior at the University of Northern Iowa. Kathy and her husband were woken up one morning in September 2003 by a phone call they never imagined receiving; a phone call from Elizabeth's boyfriend, Nick, saying Elizabeth was in the hospital not breathing.

The Huddlesons did not take time to ask questions, and hurriedly headed to the hospital, not knowing the severity of their daughter's condition. In fact, Kathy and her husband brought clothes for work and took two cars to St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids, thinking Elizabeth would recover within the next few hours and they would need to go into work later that day.

The extent of Elizabeth's illness did not take hold until Nick's parents, who were at the hospital with him when Kathy and her husband arrived, told them "it doesn't look good." Doctors did not know what was wrong with Elizabeth and would not allow her parents to see her until she died, an hour after her parents arrived at the hospital. Even then, the cause of death was not identifiable and did not become known until later that day.

Elizabeth's fight against this deadly disease began the day before when she came down with flu-like symptoms. Elizabeth decided to take a shower to make herself feel better and noticed purple spots on her skin. A few minutes later, Elizabeth began to feel extremely cold and began having difficulties breathing. Concerned and worried, Nick decided to drive her to the emergency room for treatment. Doctors performed a spinal tap, but did not find signs of meningococcal meningitis. They told Elizabeth to go home to rest and take a prescription medication for her headache and nausea.

Later that night, Elizabeth went to bed, but awoke when she started having difficulty breathing. Since her condition was getting worse, Nick drove her back to the emergency room for care, where he called Elizabeth's parents to alert them their daughter was seriously ill.

Hours after Elizabeth's death, still trying to understand what had happened, Kathy received a phone call from the hospital. They confirmed Elizabeth had died from meningococcal disease, a vaccine-preventable disease that strikes adolescents and young adults. Kathy and her husband did not know about meningococcal disease or that they could have helped protect their daughter from infection by having her immunized.

Kathy joined the National Meningitis Association's "Moms on Meningitis" program to help educate other families in Cedar Rapids about the dangers of meningococcal disease and prevention methods, including immunization.

A vaccine to help prevent meningococcal disease is approved for use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration among persons aged 2 to 55 years. The vaccine protects against four of the major strains of the disease.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but adolescents and young adults are increased risk for contracting the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends meningococcal immunization for all adolescents 11 through 18 years of age, and college freshmen living in dormitories.

“If I knew then what I do now about meningococcal meningitis and how deadly it can be, I would have had Elizabeth vaccinated,” said Kathy. “As a parent, you want to do everything you can to protect your children.” Her hope is by telling her story, no other parent will have to lose his or her child to this devastating disease.

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