

Nancy Springer

Westchester County, New York

Mother of Nick, Who Survived Meningococcal Disease

In August 1999, Nancy Springer's life changed forever. Her son Nick was 14 and at summer camp in Massachusetts when he contracted meningococcal disease, a rare but serious bacterial infection that often strikes adolescents and young adults. Nick survived the disease, but required amputation of his hands and legs.

On August 6, Nick complained of not feeling well, and he stayed over night in the camp infirmary. By morning, he was vomiting severely and had a rash on his torso. Realizing Nick had a serious bacterial infection, the camp immediately administered an IV antibiotic and transported him to the nearest hospital. Upon arrival, Nick's symptoms were identified as meningococcal disease and he was transferred to another hospital better equipped to deal with this life-threatening condition.

The emergency doctor on staff at Berkshire Medical Center called Nancy and her husband Gary to say their son was very sick and was being airlifted to Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, Massachusetts. Thinking Nick might die before Nancy could reach the hospital, the doctor held out the phone so Nick could say he loved her. Nick was in a drug-induced coma that would last for nearly two months by the time Nancy arrived that evening.

After Nick was brought out of the coma, he underwent amputations of both hands and both legs. Despite Nick's closeness to death, Nancy always believed he would survive, partly because she knew so little about meningococcal disease and how serious it can be. It wasn't until after Nick had recovered that Nancy turned her attention toward learning more about meningococcal disease and how it can be prevented, including immunization.

Nancy remembers the moment she became angry that she and other parents of adolescents and young adults weren't informed about the risk for meningococcal disease and benefits of prevention. She was meeting another child who had survived the disease with similar amputations to Nick's. The look of vulnerability and shock on the 16-year-old girl's face was a turning point for Nancy; she began dedicating her time to educating other families to prevent them from living through a similar tragedy.

Nancy joined several other parents who had been affected by the disease to form the National Meningitis Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public and medical professionals about meningococcal disease and prevention strategies, including immunization.

Ever grateful that her son survived, Nancy hopes to use her family's experience as an example of the devastating effects of meningococcal disease and as encouragement to consider vaccination and other forms of prevention.

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.

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