

Paige Kach

Carmel, New York

Mother of John, Who Survived Meningococcal Disease

Paige Kach knew about a vaccination that could have helped protect her son from meningococcal disease, a rare, yet potentially fatal infection that often strikes adolescents and young adults (college students). In fact, the vaccine was on the list of recommended immunizations from John's college. Yet, Paige was unable to locate the vaccine before John left for college, and she had no choice but to encourage her son to seek immunization on campus.

"When I sent John off to college, he was a healthy athlete," Paige says. "I never imagined a disease could leave him without his legs and fingers."

In March 2000 of John's freshman year, Paige got the phone call every mother dreads: a doctor she did not know called to say John was very sick and that she needed to get to the hospital as soon as possible. By the time she and her husband arrived, John's kidneys and lungs had shut down, and he was in a drug-induced coma.

They were told John had meningococemia, a form of meningococcal disease that infects the blood, causing irregular clotting and gangrene. Doctors didn't expect John to survive, and the Kach's called a priest to read John's last rites, preparing for the worst. For weeks, Paige waited with her family for his condition to improve.

Gangrene had set in John's right leg. To save his life, doctors amputated the leg below his knee, along with all five toes on his left foot and every finger on both hands. Despite this horror and pain, physicians managed to save his life.

After nine months in the hospital and physical rehabilitation, John learned to walk with the help of a prosthetic, and how to use his hands. Three years after surviving this horrible disease, John's left leg was amputated due to chronic pain and nerve damage as a result of meningococcal disease.

Paige is grateful to have her son, a recent college graduate, alive and doing well. She has turned her focus toward making sure other families do not have to face meningococcal disease. She hopes by sharing her family's story, she can encourage parents to make sure their adolescent and college-age children get vaccinated.

Paige joined the National Meningitis Association's "Moms on Meningitis" program to help educate other families in Carmel 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.

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