

John Kach

Carmel, New York

Meningococcal Disease Survivor

Before John Kach went to college, he read about a vaccine for meningococcal disease on his university's recommended immunization list. However, John and his family were not aware that certain adolescents and young adults are at increased risk for this dangerous bacterial infection. John's family had difficulty finding the vaccine, so he did not get immunized before heading off to college. Instead, his mom encouraged him to get the vaccine on campus.

John was a starting player on Salve Regina University's varsity basketball team his freshman year. Between games, practice and classes, he did not make getting vaccinated a priority, partly because John didn't know how serious the disease could be. He had just completed a winning season when he contracted this potentially vaccine-preventable disease that has changed his life forever.

At first, he thought he had a bad case of the flu. After a bout of vomiting, John's girlfriend insisted he go to the hospital to seek treatment for dehydration, but neither imagined the seriousness of his condition.

John was diagnosed with meningococemia, a form of meningococcal disease that infects the blood. Within hours, his kidneys and lungs stopped functioning, and doctors put him into a drug-induced coma. John remained unconscious for six weeks while his body fought the disease. John suffered from gangrene and doctors had no choice but to amputate his right leg below the knee. They also amputated all five toes on his left foot and all ten fingers.

After nine months in the hospital and physical rehabilitation, John learned to walk with the help of a prosthetic leg. He also learned how to use his hands without fingers. Three years after surviving this horrible disease, John's left leg was amputated due to chronic pain and nerve damage as a result of meningococemia.

John joined NMA's Together Educating About Meningitis (T.E.A.M.) program to help educate others about the dangers of meningococcal disease and the importance of prevention, including vaccination. Vaccines to help prevent meningococcal disease are 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 at increased risk for contracting the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends vaccination for all 11-12 year olds, with a booster dose at age 16. For those who receive the first dose at 13 through 15 years of age, a booster is recommended at 16 through 18. CDC suggests that adolescents receive the vaccine less than five years before starting college.

Now fully recovered, John has graduated from college and also educates others about the dangers of meningococcal disease. John hopes that by telling his story, he can help prevent others from facing the same tragedy.

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