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One of the lucky ones

A meningitis survivor describes his ordeal

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Thinking about what I've been through, it's weird that I consider myself lucky. I spent 5 weeks in the hospital and another 3 weeks in rehab; I've had multiple skin grafts; my left index finger and half of my right foot were amputated; and my short-term memory is so messed up that I needed to check directions for the first week after I moved into my own apartment. But compared to other victims of meningitis, I know I'm very, very lucky.

Meningococcal meningitis comes on really suddenly. That's how it happened to me. It was the week before I was to start my senior year in high school. I was feeling 100% fine. I drove to my friend's house for a planned night of playing cards. And then it just hit me. I was sweating profusely and freezing at the same time. My head hurt and I had a raging sore throat. I was exhausted. I felt as though 5 guys had beaten me up. A friend had to drive me home.

My mom took one look at me and called the doctor. He said it was probably strep throat and to come in the next morning. The next day my mom woke me up for my doctor's appointment. I went into the bathroom, shut the door, looked in the mirror, and collapsed. My mom heard the crash and rushed upstairs, but she couldn't unlock the door. Finally, my sister woke up and managed to pick the lock (a trick I had taught her). They called 911. When the paramedics arrived, I was in full arrest—no heartbeat, no respiration.

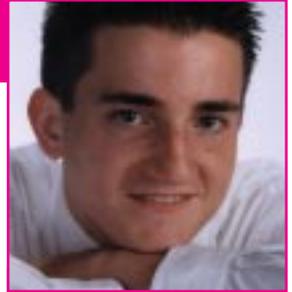
By the time the ambulance got me to the emergency room, I had multiple organ failure and was in a coma. They told my mom they didn't think I would survive the night. They called in a cardiologist, who actually saved my life. He saw the purple lesions covering my body and said I had meningococcal disease, and he started me on antibiotics. The antibiotics stop the production of bacteria but don't do anything for the toxins already released, which were causing all the problems.

At first, it didn't look good, but after 48 hours I started to turn a corner. Four days later, I woke from the coma. Shortly after, I was transferred to the burn unit of a larger medical center, where I underwent numerous skin grafts. Then came the bad news about amputation. They took off my left index finger and thought I would lose my right leg up to the knee—but they were able to amputate only half of my foot. Still, it was hard. I kept thinking I'd never be able to play basketball again. The worst part was my short-term memory loss. The therapist would say 3 words and ask me to repeat them, and I couldn't. You can imagine how frustrating that was.

I spent about 8 weeks in the hospital and rehab, then another 6 months in outpatient rehab. I'm really proud that I still was able to graduate with my high-school class, but it wasn't easy—and it's not easy now, 4 years later.

While my short-term memory has improved, I still need to write everything down. I have a planner for daily activities and a planner for school. I'm in my second year of college, and I have a B average, but I can manage only 2 courses at a time. I have 2 foot prostheses, 1 for walking and 1 for running.

I never knew a meningococcal vaccine was available. That could have made all the difference. They say good things come out of bad. And if my story helps protect other young people, then that's a good thing.



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