

## **Promising Vaccine Offers Hope Against Meningitis**

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**It's an illness with a frightening name and even more frightening effects.**

But now a new vaccine for meningitis has the potential to reduce or even eradicate the deadly disease for good.

It's called Menactra and it offers protection against all strains of the ailment.

But it was too late for one patient. A Keswick, Ontario family has already been touched by the illness. Doctors were forced to amputate the legs of a boy who contracted it.

Keaton Grassie was only nine years old when his world changed forever.

His mother vows she won't let it happen to anyone else's child.

"Everyone says that it's not going to happen to me. It won't be my child. It happens to everyone else's child," she notes.

She still can't believe how quickly the illness spread.

"I could see as he's standing there purple splotches forming on his legs and just as these blotches are forming on his legs, his lips went blue. And I turned to my husband and I said 'oh, my gosh. He's going into shock.'"

The youngster wound up spending three months in hospital, but the damage was too severe. And while they were able to save his arms, doctors had to remove his lower legs.

Now Grassie is spreading the word about the new preventative, hoping it will somehow help others to avoid the path her son was forced to take.

There have been other shots before this one. But Menactra is distinguished because it works against nearly all the strains of the disease.

"The initial vaccine that your kids got was for meningococcal group C. This new vaccine, Menactra, covers A, C, Y and W135. So you're broadening your protection," explains Dr. Dion Neame, the Chief of Pediatrics at Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital.

Even if you or your family have already been vaccinated, you can always get the new serum again.

Grassie wishes she'd had that option. "My son almost died from a disease I had no idea was even out there," she laments.

The new vaccine isn't covered by OHIP, and will set you back about \$150. For more information, talk to your doctor.

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Here's an overview of what meningitis is and how to recognize the symptoms.

What is it?

It's an infection of the lining of the brain and/or spinal cord caused by a bacteria, *Neisseria meningitidis*, carried in the throat and nose of up to 30% of healthy people.

Who's most at risk?

It strikes as many as 300 people or more a year, with children under five, young adults and teens ages 16 to 24 and those over 55 most often affected.

Up to 10 percent of those who get the disease will die from it.

One in five will suffer some form of permanent disability, ranging from hearing loss to amputation of their limbs.

It's so dangerous an otherwise healthy person who gets it can die within 48 hours.

What are the symptoms?

Early signs can be similar to those of flu and other viral infections, making it difficult to diagnose.

Symptoms in children include:

- Fever,
- Irritability,
- Sleepiness,
- Difficulty eating,
- Vomiting,
- Stiff neck.

Symptoms in youth and older individuals:

- Vomiting,
- Drowsiness,
- High fever,
- Stiff neck,
- Headache,
- Seizures,
- Joint aches and pain and
- Sensitivity to light.

How is it spread?

It can be caught through kissing, coughing, sharing common items such as eating utensils, cups, cigarettes, mouthpieces of musical instruments and other contact where saliva is passed from one person to another.

Courtesy: Toronto Public Health