

## **The vital importance of vaccinating your child against chicken pox**

Kirk and Sharon Fergusson decided not to vaccinate their children against chicken pox because. Like so many of us, they had both contracted the disease when they were young and it had been no big deal. So when six-year-old Faith caught a mild case of the chicken pox from her younger brother, her parents weren't too worried. "We thought, 'What could be the harm?'" remembers Kirk.

But when Faith began to complain of soreness around her vagina, the Fergussons embarked on a nightmare no family should have to live through.

Emergency doctors at the local children's hospital put Faith on a triple dose of antibiotics once they determined she had an infection. That was February 14, 2004. By the next day, it was clear that the infection was spreading and doctors gave the little girl an MRI, under general anesthetic.

That's when Sharon and Kirk were told the horrifying news B their child had flesh-eating disease, a rare but life-threatening complication resulting from chicken pox, a danger few parents know about.

"Once doctors looked at those images, they immediately decided to wheel her into the operating room," says Kirk.

During a multi-hour operation, doctors removed the diseased flesh and 48 hours later, went in again to make sure that no additional tissue had died. More than a year later, Faith has fully recovered, but her 27-centimetre scar is a constant reminder of her brush with death.

The Blustein family also has a daily reminder of the damage that can be caused by diseases that are avoidable by immunization. Four years ago, Dayna Blustein contracted pneumococcal meningitis and within hours of falling ill, lost her hearing entirely.

"Before she lapsed into a coma from her meningitis, the last thing she said to us was, 'Daddy, I can't hear you,'" recalls Dr. Norman Blustein, a general pediatrician. Now eight, Dayna can hear somewhat with the help of a cochlear implant and her terrifying experience moved Dr. Blustein to help expedite the approval of the pneumococcal vaccine in Canada, which was not available when his daughter was sick.

Today, both the Fergussons and the Blusteins want other parents to know that vaccine-preventable diseases are a real threat that can cause not only illness, but also disability and even death.

"It happens so fast," says Kirk. "You can't change your mind and say, 'Oh, now I think I'll get that vaccine. It's is like insurance B you don't know if you'll need it until it's too late.'"

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