

Chickenpox: A parent's perspective

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My son, Mackenzie Kim, was an extremely athletic, healthy, bright four-year old, when chickenpox threatened to take his life.

He actually had a fairly mild case of the varicella virus. On day 4, however, he developed a fever. Our paediatrician said that this was unusual, so we paid her a visit. At first, she thought it might be influenza. That was the first time that I heard that children often get other illnesses once chickenpox arrives.

That night my son had a very fitful sleep and cried out whenever he moved his leg. The second visit to our paediatrician resulted in her sending us to a hospital with a suspected infection. That night Mackenzie had his first operation on his left hip, and thus began our nightmare and our fight for his life.

It is difficult to convey to others how traumatic an experience it is to know that you and the experts are so afraid that your child may not live.

Mackenzie had contracted a streptococcus A (strep A) infection that had entered his bloodstream through the open chickenpox sores on his skin, and had travelled to his left hip and femur bone area. Our orthopaedic surgeon and his colleagues expected that Mackenzie would be fine after the first surgery and on his way home in a couple of days.

But Mackenzie did not get better! His fever remained high, and he continued to experience significant pain in his left hip and leg area. His discomfort was aggravated by the fact that Mackenzie was extremely upset when the medical staff came near him. He received intravenous antibiotics, and had blood tests performed regularly and doctors visiting constantly. He was kept on morphine throughout the first three weeks of a four-week hospital stay.

By day 7, Mackenzie was not better. It broke my heart to see him lying in his hospital bed, clearly in very great pain. The first few days he kept asking to go home; after a while, he just quit asking. He continued to have a high fever, and he was not eating anything.

On day 7, the infectious disease specialists were called. They worked diligently with the orthopaedic team.

Mackenzie's second surgery was on day 9 of his hospitalization. This time the infection had spread. The top of the femur bone and the growth plate in his left leg were being attacked by strep A. The strong antibiotics that he was receiving were not killing the infection. Mackenzie was rapidly going downhill. The high point of his day was when school friends would drop by for a visit. It meant so much to us that other parents gave of their time, tears and prayers for our little guy. Mackenzie went in for a third surgery five days later, and again the infection was back and growing stronger.

A research specialist in strep A from another hospital was called in for his advice during the third surgery. He recommended that Mackenzie be given a blood transfusion product, gammaglobulin, which contains healthy antibodies that would fight the infection.

All that night I sat with Mackenzie, dozing on and off and praying that the morning would bring us a good sign.

The next morning, Mackenzie asked for his first bit of food, a sign that maybe we had turned a corner. One day later, the surgeons operated a fourth and last time, and this time the infection was gone. We had done it! Mackenzie's life had been saved. We will always be so very very grateful for the exceptional care that he received.

Now our thoughts turned to healing him. Mackenzie could not walk. Four surgeries in the same area had left significant scar tissue, and at one point blood flow to the damaged area had been cut off. We clearly had a lot of work ahead of us.

The toll that chickenpox took on our family was extensive. After 30 days at the hospital, we left with a weakened four-year-old boy who could not walk without the aid of a walker. Our two-year-old daughter Jessica was traumatized by the fact that her mother had disappeared for 30 days and thought the way to get attention was to pretend that you were sick. My husband had spent so much time at the hospital that his business suffered. I was physically and emotionally drained. However, I tried very hard not to give into the feelings, because there was still much to do.

The doctors suggested that Mackenzie would always have a limp and that there was a very real concern as to whether the left leg would grow shorter than the right. They also suggested it would take us at least six months to get Mackenzie back to a more healthy state.

I refused to accept that he might have a limp. I took Mackenzie to physiotherapy six times a week. As soon as he was able, I switched him into sports, so that it would not be so obvious that we were trying to heal him. He did six to seven physical activities per week.

It took us two years to get Mackenzie strong, healthy and physically able. Now I have a six-year-old boy who

plays hockey, soccer and tennis, swims, and skates; he is usually one of the better players on the various teams. It does my heart good to watch him. There is no sign of a limp, and the top of the femur bone has almost grown back. Both legs now appear to be the same length. We continue to monitor his well-being with regular orthopaedic check-ups.

Chickenpox is not an innocent childhood illness. The varicella virus, because it suppresses a child's immune system, leaves the child extremely vulnerable to other life-threatening illnesses. Protect yourself and your children from this deadly virus.
