

Health

I Thought I Had the Flu—but It Turned Out to Be Sepsis

This dangerous infection robbed Amanda Flores of her arms and legs. Here, she recalls the flu-like symptoms that progressed until she was near death, and her hard-won fight to adjust to her new normal as a quadruple amputee.

By Amanda Flores, as told to Barbara Brody

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I never planned to spend Christmas eve in the hospital. But four years ago, that's exactly where I ended up.

It was December 2014. Just two days earlier, I had visited my doctor near my home in North Potomac, Maryland with miserable cold symptoms, and I was told I had the flu. It made sense—sort of. The flu was going around, and my rapid strep test was negative. I was a healthy 33-year-old, so there was no reason to suspect something else may have been causing my symptoms.

I resigned myself to staying in bed through the holiday and taking a break from my job in advertising and marketing. Yet when I started having trouble breathing, I knew I had to go back to the doctor. As soon as the nurse took my vitals and realized how low my oxygen levels were, she started screaming to call 911.

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I don't remember a thing after being wheeled outside to the ambulance; later, I found out that my then-boyfriend, Frank, jumped in his car and followed the ambulance all the way to the hospital. When I woke up from a medically induced coma weeks later, I was missing my arms and legs.

Struggling to survive Health

When I first arrived at the hospital, it was clear that I was very sick, but no one knew exactly why. My family said the doctors quickly realized I had extreme pneumonia; my lungs had basically stopped functioning, which is why I was so short on oxygen.

It took a few days for them to run tests and discover that I was in septic shock as a result of a strep infection. Although the rapid test I took in the doctor's office came back negative, I didn't know at the time that a third of rapid strep tests are inaccurate, and my doctor hadn't bothered doing a throat culture, which could more accurately detect strep.

I didn't know anything about sepsis, either. I later learned that it's a severe reaction to an infection (in my case, strep) that causes inflammation throughout the body. In turn, every organ begins to shut down one by one. If sepsis progresses and blood pressure becomes dangerously low, you're in what's called septic shock, as I was, and your life is in imminent danger.

Doctors told my family that I had less than a 15% chance of survival, and they urged them to bring my two children (then ages 2 and 5) to say good-bye. A priest was called to my bedside, Frank eventually told me.

In an attempt to save my life, I was transferred to Baltimore Shock Trauma. There, the doctors hooked me up to a machine that's usually used to harvest organs after a donor has already passed on. My lungs had stopped and my heart was beginning to fail, so their plan was to use that machine to keep my organs working for me.

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At the same time, I was given medication so blood would still be able to get to my vital organs. That meant blood and nutrients had to be diverted away from non-essential body parts. I was still in a coma when my legs had to be amputated in early January. My hands were allowed to "die" and mummify. The theory was that I wouldn't have as much phantom pain—a kind of pain many amputees say they feel

Health even though the limb they feel it in no longer exists—if the nerve endings were allowed to die off on their own.

An excruciating recovery

When I woke from the coma and a nurse told me about the amputations, I was strangely nonchalant. Maybe it was too much for me to process, but I just wanted to go back to sleep. Everyone was worried about how I was reacting, because it didn't seem normal. I think on some level I knew that I couldn't get too emotional or I wouldn't survive.

Although the doctors had me on lots of pain medication, it was never enough. After the amputations I needed a series of surgeries to get skin grafts, and the wound care was excruciating. Every day the nurses had to moisten the wrapping, remove it, and re-bandage me. That's one of the worst memories I have. I was also taking medication that made me feel like I was on fire. My mother would drench washcloths in ice water and put them on any surface that was left on my body, and within a few minutes I'd feel like I was burning again. It was horrendous.

Once I got through the surgeries and made it to rehab, that's when reality set in and I started processing what had happened. Physically, I was improving faster than the doctors had predicted, but emotionally, I was a wreck. I realized I had gone from a very attractive young woman to a cripple. I didn't know how I would deal with that, and it was devastating.

It was shortly after I left rehab and had moved into a one-bedroom apartment when I decided to take my life. I was finally watching my kids for a few hours each day (they had been living with my ex-husband while I was in the hospital and rehab), but I was still going through the trauma of letting go of my former self.

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What changed my mind was when my then 3-year-old started acting up. I said, "You have to go to time out," and he said, "Oh yeah, Mommy? How are you going to put me

Health in-time-out? You don't have any hands or legs." It was the first time anyone had directly acknowledged that. I ended up climbing onto the couch and pinning him down. That's when he realized Mommy's still a tough cookie—and I did, too. I realized how much my boys needed me, and the guilt I felt as a mother would not allow me to abandon them.

Adjusting to a new normal

I was extremely depressed for a while, even after I eventually got my prosthetics. People think they're a magic pill—"Great! You can do things again!"—but they don't work anything like your real hands and legs. They're a tool you use to get to a new normal. There's a huge learning curve, plus a lot of physical endurance as you build up your body strength so you can wear them for long periods. I hated them in the beginning, but now I can't live without them. Part of taking my life back meant driving my boys around to where they needed to go, and I need the prosthetics for that.

Wearing prosthetics also enabled me to realize my dream of walking down the aisle when I married Frank. He stuck by me and proposed to me after I came out of the coma with my limbs amputated. At the time, I told him that I wouldn't marry him unless I could walk during the ceremony. It was vanity, honestly. I admire people who are in wheelchairs and have no other option, but I was determined to walk at my wedding—and I did, this past August.

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If I've learned anything from my ordeal, it's that there's nothing wrong with talking about the hard stuff or the word "disability." Many people have different type of disabilities, and it doesn't make you an outcast. Becoming disabled doesn't mean your world is over; it means you have to become more creative and resourceful.

Of course, I also want people to know the word "sepsis." Most people don't know anything about it, and doctors don't usually suspect it unless a sick patient is elderly or has a weakened immune system. But I've heard of people who developed it after a

tooth infection because they didn't go to the dentist right away. You can even get sepsis if you fall and scrape yourself and bacteria gets into your system.

I always remind people, if you have a fever that doesn't go away or your body temperature is abnormally low, you have signs of any type of infection (whether it's a cold or a UTI) that's not getting better, you feel confused, or are in a lot of pain, go to your doctor and ask about sepsis. Make them consider it a possibility, because the sooner you get antibiotics, the greater the chance that you're going to walk out okay.

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