

Weekend Doctor

By **DR. THOMAS F. VAIL**

If you have been paying attention to the news, you have probably heard the name Aimee Copeland. If the name doesn't sound familiar, have you heard about flesh-eating bacteria in the news recently?

Aimee, 24, has been fighting flesh-eating bacteria for several weeks.

At the beginning of May, the University of West Georgia graduate student fell from a homemade zip line. She ended up with a gash in her left calf. The gash was treated and closed with 22 staples, but, within days, Aimee developed a serious infection.

The infection was so serious that doctors had to amputate both of Aimee's hands, a leg and remove tissue from her torso. Aimee was also put on a ventilator and she experienced organ failure.

The media says that Aimee has flesh-eating bacteria. The correct medical term for Aimee's condition is necrotizing fasciitis.

Necrotizing fasciitis is a rare, but very serious condition. It occurs when bacteria gets into the tissue that surround muscles, nerves and blood vessels. Once in the body, the bacteria produce toxins that shut down the immune system.

With the body's defense system out of service, the bacteria can destroy skin, fat and muscle very quickly. It is like the bacteria are eating away at the body. This is why it is called "flesh-eating bacteria." The bacteria can also get into the blood and spread to the organs, causing failure.

Many types of bacteria can cause necrotizing fasciitis. Two common bacteria that cause the disease are *Streptococcus pyogenes* (Group A strep) and *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Aimee's necrotizing fasciitis was caused by *Aeromonas hydrophilia*. This bacterium is found in almost all freshwater sources and is not usually dangerous to humans. However, *Aeromonas hydrophilia* is hard to treat with antibiotics, and if it gets into the tissue, it can be very damaging.

Knowing that there is flesh-eating bacteria out there is very scary. Necrotizing fasciitis can happen to anyone, even healthy people. Some people do have a higher risk such as diabetics, people with open sores or people who have weakened immune systems due to age, cancer or chemotherapy.

The best thing you can do to protect yourself from necrotizing fasciitis is to seek quick medical attention.

Do not hesitate to make an appointment with your podiatrist or any medical facility for proper treatment of cuts, wounds, sores, gashes and/or burns on your feet. The next thing you should do is pay attention to your feet. If the pain is getting worse, don't hesitate to contact your podiatrist again or go to the emergency room.

Necrotizing fasciitis develops very quickly. If the disease spreads too fast, doctors will have to amputate parts of the body to stop the infection from reaching vital organs. The sooner doctors are able to diagnose you and start treatment, the better your chances of keeping all of your toes.

Aimee's story is horrible, but there is good news. Aimee appears to be making progress. As we all hope for Aimee's recovery, let's also learn from her story.

With the summer ahead, our bare feet will be exposed to all kinds of things, including bacteria. Remember to be safe, practice proper foot care, and see your podiatrist immediately if any injuries should occur. Acting quickly can save a limb and your life.



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