

Baby's death sparks awareness of foodborne bacteria

Listeria brings nightmare to local family

BY STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA
STAFF WRITER

The birth of a new baby is supposed to be the most joyous occasion in a couple's life. For Livonia's Angela Babosh, it was the start of a personal nightmare.

On Christmas Eve of 1996, Babosh delivered a baby girl named Morgan Faith. Two days later, the infant died of a foodborne illness called listeria monocytogenes.

Now almost six years later, Babosh was invited to speak at a national listeria summit in Washington, D.C., meant to improve safeguards on the food supply. If she had been better informed of the effects of this common bacteria, Babosh believes, her first child might have survived.

"I'd like people to be more aware of the bacteria so they can protect themselves," Babosh said.

She and her husband had never heard of listeria. She knew not to smoke, not to drink and to avoid caffeine, but Babosh never knew that foods like lunch meats, unpasteurized dairy products and hot dogs could contain harmful amounts of Listeria, making it lethal to an unborn child. Smoked fish and cheeses can now be added to that list, as well as some fruits and vegetables.

Babosh has since become an expert on the topic. When she became pregnant for the second time - her son is now 3 years old - she joked she would live on saltine crackers. Her family is quite conscious of what they eat. Babosh soaks most foods in lemon juice, to kill any harmful bacteria. And her son has never tasted a hot dog.

"I avoided all of what I was told the 'bad' things were, but it didn't matter," she said at the summit. "I lost my baby."

Babosh is a member of STOP, Safe Tables Our Priority, a national victim's group based in Vermont. She read about STOP in a newspaper article and became involved a year later.

"By that time it had been a year and a half, two years after the incident," said Babosh in a recent interview. "I had already gone through the grieving process."

But she wanted to help spread the word on the dangers of listeria. She hopes her story will be heard by other mothers-to-be. "Unfortunately - there is literature," she said, "but none of it ever really gets through."

She believes there is more information about listeria now, but it has taken years for it to reach the public. "Six years ago, my doctor was just astounded," said Babosh. "I was bound and determined to at least get it out there."

Through STOP, Babosh has met other parents whose children survived despite the harmful bacteria, but they will not live normal lives. These children often experience bleeding on their brain, which could lead to cerebral palsy or other serious problems.

Morgan Faith Babosh was born with an enlarged liver. She was dark purple and had spots all over her tiny body. The bacteria infected her blood and she couldn't fight it. Every year as the holidays approach, the Babosh family must live with that memory.

"Almost nobody understands that 76 million people each year are getting sick with foodborne diseases, and that many become seriously ill and die, until it happens to them or a loved one," said Karen Taylor Mitchell, executive director of STOP.

"People like Angela, who have the courage to stand up and say 'This is what happened to me' are the ones that can demonstrate how important it really is to clean up our food."

A nonprofit organization, STOP's mission aims to prevent suffering, illness and death from food contaminated by pathogens.

The FDA has given a new directive to encourage additional testing of foods for listeria. But Babosh said this isn't quite enough. She and her STOP cohorts are pursuing the need for food testing on the end product - before the foods hit store shelves and are sold.

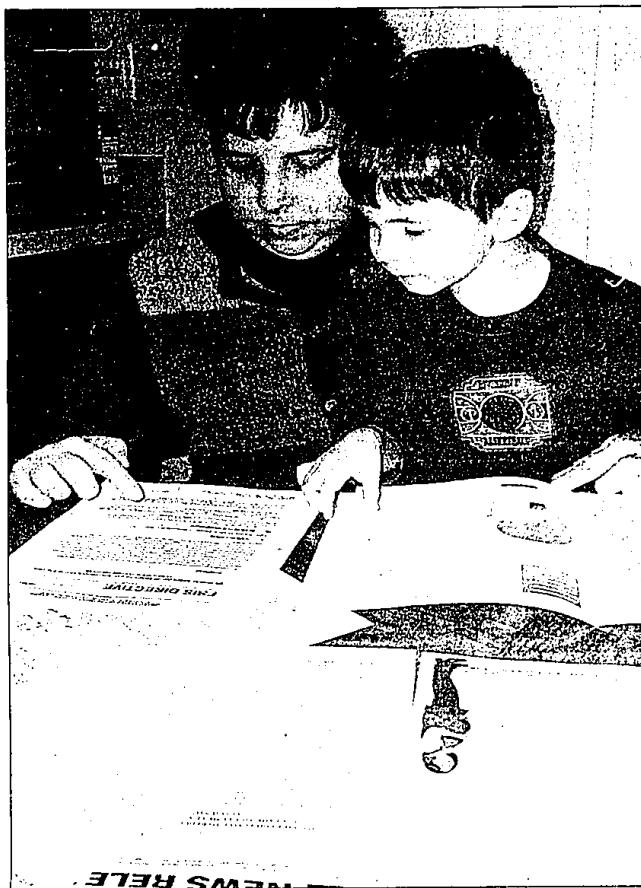
"Listeria is everywhere in small quantities," she said. "At a certain level, it is hazardous."

According to STOP's board president, Nancy Donley, those most at risk for acquiring foodborne illnesses like listeria include children, the elderly, individuals with a weak immune system, and pregnant women.

"Now more than ever, our government should be doing everything possible to eradicate preventable food-borne disease," said Donley.

For more information on Safe Tables Our Priority, call (800) 350-STOP or see the Web at www.safeeating.org.

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Angela Babosh of Livonia and her son Jacob look over information on the dangerous bacteria listeria monocytogenes.

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