

Student with Flesh-Eating Disease Will Lose Fingers

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Aimee Copeland, the Georgia student who contracted a rare flesh-eating disease after a zip line injury will lose her fingers.

"Aimee will suffer the loss of her fingers, however physicians have hope of bringing life back to the palms of her hands, which could allow her the muscle control to use helpful prosthetics. They are awaiting a safe time before embarking on surgery for this," said a post on the University of West Georgia Psychology website.

Copeland, a 24-year-old graduate student at the school, has already lost her left leg and may also lose her remaining foot, according to her family. Despite being hooked up to a ventilator and unable to speak, Copeland's family said she's showing signs of recovery.

"Aimee appears to have normal brain function at this time, which is something I'm celebrating because within Aimee we have a very compassionate heart and an incredible mind of intellect," said Copeland's father, Andy Copeland.

Aimee Copeland was riding a homemade zip line near the Little Tallapoosa River May 1 when the line snapped, causing a fall that cut open her left calf.

Doctors at a nearby hospital cleaned and closed the gash with 22 staples, but bacteria that burrowed deep into the wound caused necrotizing fasciitis, a rare but deadly infection that claimed her leg one week ago.

Copeland's family said she's coherent and able to nod and shake her head, a gesture she used to pick the Grateful Dead over the Rolling Stones Thursday, according to her sister Paige.

"I just told her if she keeps improving like this, she'll be out of here in no time," said Paige Copeland.

It's unclear how much of the ordeal Copeland remembers.

According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, she has mouthed, "What happened?" and "Where am I?" Her family has started to give her answers, but has not told her she lost her leg, the AJC reported.

The bacteria that triggered the infection, Aeromonas hydrophila, thrives in warm climates and fresh water, such as the river where Copeland was zip lining with friends. But experts say the common germ rarely causes flesh-eating disease.

"This was a perfect storm," said ABC News chief health and medical editor Dr. Richard Besser. "She had an injury to her leg, she was exposed to water then had this germ, and she was one of those people where the germ just took off."

Although the infection is rare, it's extremely dangerous. Mortality rates for *Aeromonas*-related necrotizing fasciitis are upward of 60 percent, according to a 2010 report published in the journal *Clinical Microbiology Reviews*.

After her leg was amputated, Copeland was flown to Joseph M. Still Burn Center in Augusta, Ga., where her recovery has been touch and go. Tuesday, one week after the accident, her heart stopped beating, forcing doctors to resuscitate her.

Students and faculty at the University of West Georgia, where Copeland was completing a masters degree in psychology, gathered for a vigil Thursday night.

"Despite the fact that medical evidence says she should be dead, she isn't," Chris Aanstoos, a professor of psychology, told WSB-TV. "I think that's what makes it so precious to so many people to see how amazing she really is."