

Georgia Student Fighting Flesh-Eating Disease After Zip Line Injury

By KATIE MOISSE / Good Morning America – Wed, May 9, 2012 12:06 PM EDT

A Georgia woman is fighting for her life after contracting flesh-eating disease during a zip line accident.

Aimee Copeland, a 24-year old master's student at the University of West Georgia, hopped on the homemade zip line during a kayaking trip with friends in Carrollton, Ga. But the line broke, cutting a gash in Copeland's left calf and introducing a life-threatening infection that on Friday claimed her left leg and part of her abdomen.

"It's a miracle she made it past Friday night," Copeland's father, Andy, told ABC affiliate WSBTV.

Cuts in the skin open the door for flesh-eating disease *flesh-eating disease*, officially known as **necrotizing fasciitis, a rare strep infection** that borrows deep into wounds and destroys the surrounding tissue.

"The **bacteria produce enzymes that can dissolve muscle deep down**," said Dr. William Schaffner, chair of preventive medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., and president of the National Foundation for Infectious Diseases. "And because it's so deep, it can be a sneaky infection that's not immediately appreciated by the patient."

After the injury last Tuesday, Copeland went to a nearby emergency room where doctors **closed the gash with 22 staples**. But she **returned to the hospital the next day complaining of severe pain**.

"The symptom that should ring alarm bells is serious, **unremitting pain**," said Schaffner. "An otherwise healthy individual with a **seemingly superficial injury** who has severe pain *should have a much more thorough evaluation*."

Doctors sent Copeland home with a prescription for **painkillers**. She **returned to the hospital again Thursday** and was **released again, this time with antibiotics**. On **Friday**, Copeland was diagnosed with necrotizing fasciitis, and **her left leg was amputated at the hip**.

"The two main treatment options are antibiotics to kill the bacteria and surgery," said Schaffner, adding that bacteria left behind can invade the blood. "You have to look at the wound and think, 'This is as far as the infection has gone; now I have to cut even further.'"

Where the infection came from is unclear, but Schaffner said the most likely culprit is Copeland's own throat.

"It could have come from an outside source; some other person who was perhaps helping clean and dress the wound," he said, adding that the bacteria is transmitted through respiratory droplets. "But more often than not, sadly, it turns out to be the patient's own bacteria."

Frequent hand washing, and avoiding people with sore throats can help reduce the risk of flesh-eating disease, according to the [National Necrotizing Fasciitis Foundation](http://www.nmff.org/) (<http://www.nmff.org/>). And all cuts, no matter how small, and should be cleaned and covered with sterile bandages.

Since the amputation, Copeland's recovery has been touch and go. On Tuesday, one week after the accident, her temperature spiked and she lost her pulse.

"They actually were able to do CPR and resuscitate her very quickly," Andy Copeland told WSBTV. "I don't want people with long faces right now because we already had a miracle Friday night when she survived. ... I just believe we have to stay positive right now to honor Aimee."