

Missouri detective battles flesh-eating infection

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Friends and loved ones of Lee's Summit, Mo., Police Detective Joshua Ward are praying for the 34-year-old married father of three who, even after five surgeries in as many days, remained in critical condition Monday at St. Luke's Hospital battling a rare and sudden flesh-eating infection.

Ward was on a ventilator in the hospital's [intensive care unit](#). The fatality rate of infections as serious as Ward's is more than 60 percent, his doctor said.

"I told his wife that if he gets through this, we're talking about months of recovery," physician Scott Sagraves, the director of St. Luke's department of trauma, surgical and critical care, said Monday afternoon. "First we have to get him to survive. And that is still in question."

Ward, who with his wife, Melissa, has 6-year-old twin girls and a 10-month-old son, is a nine-year veteran of the Lee's Summit Police Department.

He entered St. Luke's near the Country Club Plaza on Thursday soon after he decided to visit an emergency room in Lee's Summit for a painful infection around his right shoulder and right side that had appeared earlier in the week and seemed to be growing worse, the Rev. Dave Moore said. Moore is a Lee's Summit police chaplain and was chosen to speak on behalf of the Ward family.

At St. Luke's, doctors quickly determined Ward's infection was caused by a sometimes-fatal form of necrotizing fasciitis, which tests later confirmed to be caused by group A streptococcus, a bacteria that most frequently causes illnesses such as [strep throat](#), impetigo or scarlet fever and is commonly treatable with antibiotics.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in very rare instances, should the bacteria enter an open wound and infect the body's deep muscles or fascia, the connective tissue, it can also become necrotizing, essentially eating away and destroying the tissue in quick fashion.

Only about 650 to 800 cases are reported to the CDC each year. The infection can be deadly if it reaches vital organs. Treatment requires flooding the body with antibiotics and aggressive surgery to cut away the spreading infection. The infection already has forced surgeons at St. Luke's to remove large amounts of Ward's muscle and tissue.

"He's had surgery Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and should be in his fifth surgery right now," Moore, who also is the pastor at New Summit Church in Lee's Summit, said earlier Monday. "They have been taking away tissue and muscle and they have been working on his right side initially, and coming across to the front of his torso, the pectoral area and abdomen."

Sagraves said that stopping the aggressive effects of the bacteria probably will require more surgeries.

"He is in [critical condition](#)," Sagraves said of Ward.

Should the detective survive, recovery will require additional and many reconstructive skin grafts, Sagraves said.

"The family, as you might imagine, is very overwhelmed," Moore said. "Their first and foremost attention is the survival and life of their loved one, and they are doing everything they can to reach out to him and help him survive."

The positive news is that with each surgery doctors seem to be removing less tissue, Moore said.

Sagraves said the illness is not communicable like a virus.

"From the standpoint of the prevalence of the bacteria, a lot of people have it," Sagraves said. "Sometimes when it gets invasive, you have diseases develop like strep throat and impetigo and people deal with that all the time, and it's cared for with antibiotics."

"It doesn't infect people sitting on a table top or anything. His (Ward's) family, wife, children, other officers aren't showing any signs or symptoms. So the general public is not at risk for the spread of this bacterium from him."

Precisely how Ward developed the infection is unknown.

"With respect to how he got it, I think that's a mystery. We may never know," Sagraves said. "I saw him when he came in. Typically, when we see these types of infections it could be something minor, like a scrape or a splinter or an infected hair, and the bacteria goes deeper and it causes havoc. But his wife said he wasn't sick before this, and none of the children were ill."

Sagraves said Ward has a long, difficult road ahead, but teams of doctors are working to heal him. Lee's Summit police spokesman Sgt. Christopher Depue said everyone in the department was thinking of Ward.

"We're hoping for a speedy recovery of a great police officer," he said.

Friends have set up a GoFundMe site to raise money to defray the cost of any future needs. As of Monday morning, more than \$12,700 had been raised.

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