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Paula Francis, Anchor

**Bad Reaction to Medication Can Be Deadly**

**STEVENS  
JOHNSON  
SYNDROME**  
FOUNDATION

(Sept. 11) – More than 2 million Americans experience an adverse reaction to medication each year. One reaction in particular is known as Stevens Johnson syndrome. It results in a frightening and life-threatening side effect. A local man has seen the syndrome's devastating effects firsthand when his granddaughter nearly died.

Julie McCawley turned 10 years old this week. Her grandfather, Las Vegas resident Robert Landsperg, considers each of her birthdays a blessing. At just 11 months of age, Julie developed the inflammatory disorder Stevens Johnson syndrome.

"It was devastating," Landsperg said. "I mean, if you really want to know, to see a child that's literally burned, it's a terrible thing. And we don't want to see it happen to any more children. It has to get out there."

Julie very nearly died. Her condition was caused by a bad reaction to a prescription drug – in her case, phenobarbital. But UMC pharmacologist Don Frisch says SJS is highly unpredictable and can occur with practically any form of medication. It's characterized by a severe inflammation of the mucous membranes of the mouth, throat, intestinal tract, the anus or genital area and the lining of the eyelids.

The condition appears first as a common rash but can escalate dramatically if the patient continues to take the medication.

"If you see something like a rash or itching from a drug you've never taken before, watch it," Dr. Frisch added, "because usually the bad reactions occur the second time you take it. Because the first time you take a drug, your body is sensitized. The second time is when it really reacts."

While any drug can trigger a bad reaction, research indicates that some have a higher propensity – including penicillin, sulfonamides, some anti-epileptic drugs, and certain barbituates like phenobarbital.

When SJS runs out of control, it can progress to toxic epidermal necrosis. The skin falls off, and the patient can die. Las Vegas emergency room physician Dale Carrison says early symptoms should not be ignored.

"My advice to patients is that if you're taking a drug and you see you're starting to have a reaction, see your doctor," Dr. Carrison said. "If you see one blister, don't wait for two blisters – get to your doctor and catch it early, 'cause that's the key."

UMC sees a case of SJS about once every four to six months. Landsperg's daughter – Julie's mom – created a foundation for Stevens Johnson Syndrome. For more information, click on the link below.

[Steven Johnson's Syndrome](#)

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