

16 candles? Time for your meningitis shot, Molly Ringwald says

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Leslie Maier lost her son, Chris, to meningococcal meningitis more than 15 years ago, but by telling his story she hopes to educate other parents about this rare but potentially deadly illness that a vaccine can prevent.

Soon after Chris passed away in 2005, Maier joined the board of the National Meningitis Foundation. Now she leads the foundation's new initiative, called the 16 Vaccine campaign, to spread the word that the first shot of the meningococcal [vaccine](#), given at age 11 or 12, needs to be followed with a booster shot at age 16. Estimates suggest that nearly half of American teens do not receive that crucial second shot.

In the campaign, Maier has a powerful ally—actress and mom of three, Molly Ringwald.

"I was approached about being a possible spokesperson for the [meningitis vaccine](#)," said Ringwald, star of '80s teen classics "Pretty in Pink," "16 Candles" and "The Breakfast Club."

"I was really moved by Leslie's story," she said. "I have a teenage daughter and two pre-teens, and I'm passionate about keeping them safe and healthy. For me, that means being vaccinated."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, Ringwald's 11-year-old twins are now eligible for their first dose of the meningococcal vaccine, while her 17-year-old daughter, Mathilda, could get the booster shot starting last year.

For Maier, this is a special campaign, as Chris was 17 when he passed away. "I feel like it would have saved Chris' life had he got his vaccine at 16, so I just want other parents to know what I didn't know," Maier said. Chris was not vaccinated because the two-dose vaccine now recommended for teens was not yet approved.

"So, that's what we're trying to raise awareness," Ringwald said, "so parents don't go through what Leslie went through, with the loss of her son, Chris."

Meningococcal meningitis is caused by bacteria spread through respiratory droplets and saliva. Coughing, kissing, sharing drinks and living in close contact with others are some common methods of infection. Teens and [young adults](#) face the highest risks of catching this illness, likely because they tend to engage in these infection-spreading behaviors and often live and socialize in group settings—such as college dorms.

The vaccine offers protection for an estimated three to five years, according to Dr. Amy Middleman, chief of adolescent health at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine.

"A booster dose of the vaccine—usually at age 16 years—results in an increase of those available antibodies and protects the person against [disease](#) for an estimated additional five years, through the

period of adolescence and young adulthood during Wednesday]," Maier said. which [young people](#) are at greatest risk of acquiring the disease," Middleman said.

It strikes quickly, can be deadly

Meningococcal disease has become increasingly rare in the United States, starting before the vaccine was available, according to Middleman.

"However, rates of disease have gone down further, specifically among the age groups receiving these vaccines, indicating vaccine effectiveness," Middleman said. "The vaccine is thought to be 80%-85% effective against the disease." In 2018, only an estimated 330 cases occurred across the country, according to the CDC.

But when [meningococcal meningitis](#) strikes, it can claim a person's life quickly, killing 10% to 15% of those it infects. Of those who survive, many are harmed irreparably, living with permanent disabilities such as brain damage and amputated limbs.

The disease took Chris' life within 24 hours of his first symptom. On March 1, 2005, he went to school, ate dinner, and went to soccer practice. He complained of a headache and was experiencing symptoms consistent with the common cold. At practice that night, the coach sent Chris home early, as it was apparent that the state soccer champion was getting sicker.

"When he got home, he took a bath because he couldn't get warm, and I could tell he had a fever," Maier recalled. She figured it must be the flu.

In the morning, Maier checked on him before leaving for her job as a kindergarten teacher. His dad stayed home with Chris, and they agreed to go to the doctor. "When his dad went to check to see if he was ready to go to the doctor, he found Chris laying on his bed. Chris' last words were, "Dad, I can't feel my feet," and he became unconscious." The paramedics arrived soon after, and within 25 minutes, Chris was gone.

"We went from having an ordinary day on a Tuesday to losing our beloved son by lunchtime [on

Wednesday]," Maier said. Now, Maier retells this story to people across the country, alongside other parents who've suffered similar experiences due to this illness. Despite the apparent rise of anti-vaccination sentiment, Maier said that any hesitance among parents seems to dissipate once she shares her story.

"I think by using our stories, as examples of regular people who lost children to vaccine-preventable diseases, it helps people realize, "Wait a minute, if that can happen to them, then it can happen to me," Maier said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [meningococcal vaccination](#).

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