I'm No Longer Immune to Measles

By Alex Berezow, PhD — September 10, 2019

Although an annual exam is probably not necessary if you're young and healthy, it's a good idea to go to the doctor every once in a while. As he's prodding about, he might find something rather unexpected.

Originally, I had gone in for moderately severe back pain accompanied by pain radiating down the left side of my arm. My doctor believed the cause was a bulging disc in the cervical (neck) region of my spine. He poked me with a couple of sharp things (known as a two-point discrimination test) and discovered that I had lost some sensation in my pinky finger. As it so happens, the radiating pain went down the side of my arm adjacent to my pinky finger. All of that pointed to a problem with my eighth cervical (C8) nerve.

About 80% of the time, bulging discs resolve on their own. So he told me to wait it out (possibly up to a few months) and take Tylenol or other over-the-counter anti-inflammatory meds as needed. Good!

But I wasn't done yet. I asked the doc to do some blood work. High cholesterol runs in my family, and I've got borderline high cholesterol. What he found surprised me.

Credit: Dctrzl/Wikipedia [1]

RUBELLA IGG IU/ML index

Value 2.16

Standard Range Immune >0.99
Non-immune <0.90

Equivocal 0.90 - 0.99
Yes, I've still got borderline high cholesterol, so that wasn't a surprise. (It was a little disappointing, since I've increased my fiber intake and started exercising.) Unbeknownst to me, he asked the clinic to do an antibody screen. (To my knowledge, antibody screens are not part of routine blood work.) He knows I have a new baby girl and probably wanted to see if I needed a booster shot. He's a good doctor.

I'm glad he ordered the test. I found out that, despite having received the MMR vaccine as a kid, I'm no longer immune to measles.

As shown, I am immune to both rubella and mumps. For rubella, a positive test (which means the appropriate level of antibodies has been detected in my blood) is anything above 0.99 International Units/mL (my blood had 2.16 IU/mL). For mumps, a positive test is anything above 10.9 antibody units/mL (mine had 71.1 AU/mL). That's right. Mumps shrinks in fear when it encounters my blood.

But not measles (a.k.a., rubeola). I've lost immunity, almost as if I've never been immune to begin with. A negative test (which means an appropriate level of antibodies has not been detected) is anything below 13.5 AU/mL. That's what I had.

This isn't unusual. One of the reasons measles is staging a comeback is because of waning immunity. Indeed, a 43-year-old flight attendant who just died from measles [2] had received the vaccine as a child.

So, I'm off to the pharmacy to get an MMR jab. And an influenza one, too. It's what loving parents and responsible citizens do.

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