

**Newsday**

# Grieving mom's plea: Get vaccinated



Patti Wukovits and daughter Kimberly Coffey. Credit: Courtesy of Patti Wukovits

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In the spring of 2012, I lost my 17-year-old daughter to a disease that is now preventable by vaccine. Just days away from prom and her high school graduation, Kimberly felt ill one day after school. The next, we were rushing her to the emergency room. Hours later, doctors told me they suspected Kim had meningitis.

To me, that was unbelievable — as a nurse myself, my kids were always up to date on their vaccines, and Kim had been given her meningitis vaccination.

What we didn't know at the time was that a different serotype of meningitis — meningitis B — existed, but we were still two years away from having a vaccine to prevent its spread. The science just wasn't there yet, and because of that we lost Kim to the devastating disease.

So now, as summer is upon us, and graduations, proms and other activities have finally resumed after more than a year of the pandemic, I struggle when people tell me they've not yet been vaccinated, or don't want to vaccinate their kids against COVID-19.

I didn't have a chance to protect Kim against meningitis B. But today, we all have the opportunity to help protect ourselves and our families from the potentially deadly consequences of COVID with the COVID vaccine.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of being vaccinated against COVID and being up to date on all recommended vaccines, like both meningitis vaccines. We know that vaccination rates for other vaccine-preventable diseases have dropped dramatically during the pandemic.

Until last year, most of us had never experienced the impact infectious disease can have — on our health, the health of our loved ones, our economy and on our collective psyche. Long past are the days of polio, smallpox and other such diseases.

However, as we all now know, these diseases do exist; they evolve, and we need to protect ourselves and our kids from them — and vaccines are the best way to do that. I know that vaccines can mean the difference between life and death.

Since losing Kim, I've dedicated my life to not letting another family experience a loss like ours. I've talked to researchers. I've sat at conference

after conference learning about vaccines from some of the brightest minds who dedicate their lives to keeping us all safe.

We owe it to the science, and to each other to take advantage of the advances we've seen in fighting COVID-19.

The ability of science to advance in just a decade is remarkable. It took two years after Kim died for the vaccine that could have saved her to be approved in the U.S. Imagine if we had to wait two years for the COVID vaccine? How many more hundreds of thousands of lives would have been lost? How many more people would be living with debilitating side effects?

We've got a chance to get a hold of this problem and put it behind us. Please don't take a risk. Get the COVID vaccine for you and your family. And while you are at it, make sure everyone is up to date on all recommended vaccines, too.

*This guest essay represents the views of Patti Wukovits, a nurse from Massapequa Park who is executive director of the Kimberly Coffey Foundation and co-founder of the Families Against COVID-19 initiative.*