Conroe family says immune system disease can go undetected

By Lucretia Fernandez
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Every day, a Conroe father and son must take extra precautions in everything they do, because the tiniest cut could potentially send them to the hospital.

Ronnie Rodes, 52, and his 7-year-old son, Garrett Rodes, are two of approximately 300 people in the United States who battle a form of primary immunodeficiency disease.

More than 150 types of PIDD exist, affecting approximately 250,000 people in the United States. The diseases are a result of the body’s inability to produce enough antibodies to fight infection or cellular defenses against infection not functioning properly, according to the Immune Deficiency Foundation.

Ronnie Rodes, along with other PIDD volunteers, is trying to educate people about the disease, which often goes undetected, during April — National PIDD Awareness Month.

For 38 years, Ronnie Rodes battled pneumonia, bronchitis, sinusitis and fatigue, but it wasn’t until he suffered a fungus in his lungs — which he picked up from working in a flower bed — that he was diagnosed with primary immunodeficiency disease.

“I always wondered why I was always sick,” Ronnie Rodes said. “Once the diagnosis is there, that’s half the battle because you no longer wonder what’s wrong with you.”

After learning he was more susceptible to becoming sick, Ronnie Rodes began taking extra care of himself, including going to bed early, exercising, carrying hand sanitizer with him and wearing a mask when working outside or near mold.

Ronnie Rodes and his wife, Jennifer, said they suspected Garrett had inherited the genetic disease when he battled numerous ear infections and a rash when he was a year old. Tests showed that Garrett, who has muscular dystrophy, also had PIDD.

“It’s extremely difficult for him, because the muscles that are deteriorating are the muscles he needs to fight the diseases,” Ronnie Rodes said. “He has to have nasal irrigations and cough assists each night to clear the mucus out of his system. … What can barely affect one person can be deadly to someone with a low immune system.”

Although no cure exists, hope is on the horizon. The Rodes participate in a National Institute of Health clinical trial, flying to Maryland at least once a year. Just recently, the gene that causes the form of PIDD affecting Ronnie and Garrett Rodes was discovered.

The key is research and awareness, Ronnie Rodes said.

“Even doctors need to know there are other things causing someone to get sick,” Ronnie Rodes said.

For more information about the Immune Deficiency Foundation, visit www.primaryimmune.org or call (800) 296-4433.