
INVESTIGATIONS

He rejected the COVID-19 vaccine and almost died. Now he's preaching its virtues to Congress.

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As a diabetic, Joshua Garza had a chance to get the COVID-19 vaccine within the first month. In a decision that will forever haunt him, Garza passed; he thought the vaccine was still too new.

It almost cost him his life and made him a vaccine convert. On Thursday, Garza is scheduled to tell his story before the U.S. House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis in a hearing on overcoming vaccine hesitancy.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 63.4% of adults have gotten at least one shot, well below President Joe Biden's July 4 goal of 70%. In announcing the hearing, the committee said more outreach needs to be done in rural areas and communities with low vaccination rates.

About 20 percent of Americans are either refusing to get vaccinated or remain unsure, the committee said. Thursday's five witnesses include two public health experts, a business school professor, an activist and Garza.

Just days after Garza opted out of the vaccine, he started feeling tired and could not catch his breath. A test from a nearby drug store on the outskirts of Houston brought unwelcome news: He had COVID-19.

The following days were a blur. He was rushed by ambulance to a nearby hospital. Struggling to breathe, he felt like he was under water and barely got any sleep.

Two weeks later, he learned that his lungs were shot.

"They came back and told us, they've done everything they could at that point," Garza said. "They first said, 'We're going to put you on a ventilator, and only one out of 10 people

survive.”

That was Saturday, Feb. 13. He called his family, including his wife and 12-year-old son, to say goodbye. Then he decided he was not ready to give up and asked to be transferred to Houston Methodist hospital, which agreed to admit him.

Houston Methodist put him on a life-support machine called ECMO, which took over for his failing lungs. Doctors there ultimately determined that his only chance was lung transplants.

In three weeks, Garza got new lungs. He remembers waking up and realizing he could breathe on his own again. By then, though, his muscles had atrophied. He had to relearn how to walk.

As a transplant recipient, the 43-year-old oil and gas worker will forever be on immunosuppressive drugs to prevent his body from rejecting the lungs. He can't return to work for six months

Out of the hospital since May 27, Garza now realizes he could have avoided it all had he gotten vaccinated when he first had a chance. The worst of it for him was all the lonely days and night, not knowing his fate and regretting his decision.

He thinks stories like his have not gotten enough attention.

“I think there's a lot of people that are kind of on the fence,” Garza said. “And I think they need to know probably the worst side of it.”

Now, both his wife and son have gotten the shots and Garza himself will, too, as soon as the doctors clear him.