



AMELIA KUNHARDT/THE PATRIOT LEDGER

■ Michael and Jennifer Vitelli with sons Luca, 8, left, Antonio, 6, Sal, 2, and Gino, 9, at their Marshfield home. Gino and Luca have been diagnosed with PANDAS – Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder Associated with Streptococcus.

MARSHFIELD

'Every day is a battle'

Rare disorder strikes two boys in Vitelli family

By Maureen McCarthy
THE PATRIOT LEDGER

Jennifer and Michael Vitelli put their four sons to bed as usual one night last September. The boys said their prayers and their parents tucked them in and kissed them good night.

The next morning, their lives changed abruptly.

The couple's oldest son, Gino, 9, woke up unable to perform routine activities. He couldn't brush his teeth or tie his shoes without assistance and the tone of his voice changed.

The couple sought medical attention for him, but Gino's condition worsened in the days and weeks to follow. The third-grader was overcome with anxiety, fear and terror. He experienced insomnia, sensory sensitivities, age regression and the onset of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder-like behaviors, tics and Tourette syndrome.

"(Gino) started compulsively cracking his joints ... again and again for hours on end," said Jennifer Vitelli, 41, describing the intensity of her son's

condition.

By early October and under the care of his local pediatrician, Gino was diagnosed with Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder Associated with Streptococci or PANDAS.

The disorder, a clinical diagnosis still being debated in medical circles, is said to be a sudden onset of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder-like behaviors and tics disorders that worsen following the aftermath of a bacterial infection such as "Strep throat" and Scarlet Fever.

Researchers believe that the antibodies that typically fight infection, attack part of the brain instead and treatment typically calls for a course of antibiotics to fight the infectious trigger.

Gino was treated with antibiotics due to an immunodeficiency disorder – the body's inability to fight infection, his symptoms continue to wax and wane.

The Vitelli family's medical journey was magnified when younger brother Luca, 8, who also has

an immunodeficiency disorder, tested positive for the presence of strep and was diagnosed with PANDAS in January.

The Vitellis are working with a team of physicians – which includes their local pediatrician, specialists at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and a New Jersey-based child neurologist – in an effort to identify an effective treatment.

Both boys continue to struggle daily and take multiple medications to help stabilize their condition until a cure is found.

"Every day is a battle for them, and they face it head on," Jennifer Vitelli said.

A fundraiser will be held June 21 at Granite Links Golf Club in Quincy to help the Vitelli family with medical costs.

"Life is really hard right now," Jennifer Vitelli said. "But the outpouring of support has been humbling."

For event and donation information, visit friendsofthevitellifamily.myevent.com.

