



# Struck By Lightning

*Summer brings with it summer thunderstorms. On the average, at least 500 people in the United States are struck by lightning each year. (The global tally is around 240,000 annually!) Surprisingly, about 90% survive. However, almost invariably they are transformed by the harrowing experience—and generally not for the better, experiencing everything from relentless pain to personality changes, and often both. To this day scientists are baffled by what truly lies beneath these nightmarish transformations.*

Aryeh Cohen



Michael Utley remembers virtually nothing from the day he “died.” The only information he has is from details that he slowly pieced together over the years from witnesses, family and friends.

The story began on May 8, 2000. Utley, a 48-year-old stockbroker, was playing golf with colleagues Dick Gill and Bill Todd and their friend Jim Sullivan, in Pocasset, Massachusetts, a village three miles from the Cape Cod Canal. In early afternoon, the dark clouds that had been visible in the distance throughout the morning began to cover the sky. Soon rain began to fall.

Hearing the golf course’s storm horn, the group realized it was time to halt their game. Gill, Todd and Sullivan immediately headed for shelter at the nearby clubhouse. Utley took a bit longer to pack up the equipment when, suddenly, there was a mighty thunder and he felt a solid whack. The three friends who had gone ahead wheeled around in time to see Utley wobble and collapse. Wisps of smoke rose from his body.

When they went to investigate they found an eerie scene. Utley’s shoes lay several feet away from his body. His fingers were singed while his eyebrows and hair were wiry and hardened. He was lying on the ground lifeless.

Gill, a former Marine who had taken CPR courses, rushed to his stricken friend’s side. He began forcing air into Utley’s lungs while explaining to Todd how to administer chest compressions. Sullivan ran to seek professional help. Meanwhile, the clouds unleashed their cargo in a heavy torrent of rain. Within several minutes the paramedics arrived and took over. On the way to the hospital Utley’s heart began to respond.



Michael Utley on the golf green where he was struck by lightning.

Utley remembers nothing of what transpired until the moment he awoke in a different ambulance, where he found himself connected to wires and tubes that led to complex machinery. A paramedic stood at his feet. “Where am I?” the shocked Utley asked.

“You’re on the way to rehab,” came the reply.

“What happened?”

“You were hit by lightning 38 days ago.”

Being struck by lightning is the epitome of “bad luck.” Rain, snow and hail can reach anyone, but for lightning to find a person requires an uncanny set of circumstances.

Around 500 Americans are struck by lightning each year (about 240,000 around the world). It is noteworthy that 90% of these people survive, but the nightmare that follows is often unbearable. Their bodies and personalities undergo drastic changes. Ironically, most survivors do not recall the actual incident, yet they must deal with the mysterious physical and psychological problems that often appear long after the visible wounds have healed, and after they have been released from the hospital.

Many lightning survivors find their entire lives have changed. They may suffer chronic pains, poor memory and/or they begin to suffer from severe mood swings. Many struggle to grasp what has happened to them. They know that there was a very sudden change—something extremely rare, unbelievable—and they are no longer the same. The people around them also face a difficult struggle in coming to terms with what happened to the victim.

The entire phenomenon is shrouded in mystery. Scientists cannot explain what happens to the victims. While many scientists have dedicated their careers to researching lightning, only a few have studied how and why lightning hurts people. The reason performing this study is challenging is because only a very small number of people are struck by lightning. Most of the available information in medical volumes and journals on treating sufferers of lightning strikes discusses only the immediate issues. The



Lightning lights up the skies above a city.

long-term effects of the trauma are barely covered.

Paramedics who treat victims of lightning are often unsure exactly what happened to the victim. They have minimal training in how to recognize the victim of a lightning strike. Lightning does not leave visible wounds on the body, though there are usually marks left on the skin.

## Nightmare Afterwards

It was a late afternoon in 2009 when Becky Garriss awoke on Glastenbury Mountain along the Appalachian Trail in Vermont. She found herself sitting on a layer of pine needles with her back leaning against a tree as though she was waking up from a nap. But it couldn’t have been just a nap. Her right hand was paralyzed against her chest and there were various burn marks over her clothes.

Somehow Garriss overcame her disorientation and tracked 10 miles over the muddy trail back down the mountain. She called for help at the first house she found. When she arrived at the hospital, doctors diagnosed her right away: The telltale burn marks on her right hand and leg told them she had probably been hit by lightning.

The immediate consequences suffered by a victim of lightning are not always the same.



Scorched clothing from a person who was hit by lightning.



US Air Force vehicle in Georgia that was struck by lightning in January, 2012.

Some survivors are temporarily blinded and deafened. The powerful electric surge can leave them with a ruptured eardrum. Others