

Patient Information

Renal Services

Vasculitis

What does it mean?

Vasculitis means inflammation of the blood vessels. There are several different kinds of vasculitis and their effects depend on the types of blood vessels and parts of the body affected. It can involve different organs of the body such as the lungs, skin, joints or kidneys. The inflammation can reduce or stop the blood supply to vital areas which damages the organ being supplied with blood. Vasculitis affecting the kidney can cause kidney failure.

What causes it?

Usually the cause isn't known. On some occasions it starts with an infection or allergic reaction. In each case the immune system is involved.

The immune system exists within the body to fight off infection. It is very powerful, and sometimes can be overactive and turn against the body itself. When this happens, diseases can occur and vasculitis is one such disease, where the blood vessels themselves are damaged.

Vasculitis affecting the kidney is quite uncommon, and affects about 20-30 people in every million. The severity can vary greatly, from very mild, where no particular therapy is required, to a severe illness where many different organs in the body are affected.

What are the symptoms?

These may vary from person to person. When the disease first appears symptoms may include weight loss, fever, muscle and joint pains, or a feeling of tiredness and general illness. All parts of the body can be affected, but the following are some of the more common symptoms and where they occur:

Kidney

The specialised small blood vessels in the kidney which filters the blood to make urine are particularly sensitive to vasculitis. Damage to the kidney may cause blood to appear in the urine. Severe damage can cause kidney failure. In this case a kidney biopsy (taking a small sample of the kidney to look at under a microscope) will be required to confirm the diagnosis and help plan treatment.



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Skin

The skin contains small blood vessels which can be damaged by vasculitis. When this happens these small blood vessels burst causing a rash to appear as small red blotches on the skin, particularly the lower legs (purpura).

Joints

Inflammation around the joints can cause pain and soreness.

Nose

Vasculitis can affect the inside of the nose, causing nosebleeds and facial pain, sometimes before damage to the kidneys becomes apparent.

Lungs

Small blood vessels inside the lungs affected by vasculitis may bleed causing the patient to cough up blood. This can be serious and needs urgent treatment.

Other parts of the body

Almost any other part of the body can be affected. It can very occasionally cause a stroke, heart attack or damage to the bowel. However, once treatment has been started, it is unusual for such problems to occur.

What is the treatment?

Vasculitis responds well to treatment. A combination of steroid and cyclophosphamide are used. These are both very powerful and reduce the activity of the immune system therefore reducing the damage caused by the disease. They are usually given for 6 months and then changed to less powerful therapy if the disease is under control. These drugs can cause serious side effects, and careful monitoring is required. The main problem is infection, because the activity of the immune system has been reduced. Any fevers or other possible signs of infection should be reported to the doctor straight away.

If vasculitis is caught at an early stage, treatment is very effective. It does cause serious kidney damage, and the working of the kidneys often does not return to normal completely. However you can lead a normal life with quite badly damaged kidneys. It is important to understand that it is a long term condition, although in many patients the disease goes into remission and treatment can be stopped after several years. Although you may have had one episode of the disease, it may occur again. Symptoms may come and go as part of the condition. If symptoms recur, or new ones appear, it is important to seek advice early and receive the appropriate treatment in order to prevent damage caused by any new areas of inflammation. The doctor will be able to decide whether a symptom is caused by vasculitis.

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What can I do?

Unfortunately it seems there is nothing you can do in your lifestyle or diet that will stop you getting vasculitis, or help prevent a disease recurrence. However if you follow the advice below, you can still make a tremendous difference to your health.

Always take your medication at the times prescribed. Doses may be changed often, so make sure you know what has been prescribed. If you are in doubt about the dosage of tablets always telephone and check.

Always carry a steroid warning card if you are on steroids.

Report any worsening of symptoms or new symptoms to your doctor as soon as possible. This is so that you can receive the appropriate treatment as soon as possible. Symptoms of recurrence of the disease are often similar to the ones you had when it began for the first time. Stay alert to the recurrence of symptoms or new ones so that you can report them straight away.

Take regular exercise. People suffering from vasculitis lose muscle strength during illness. Ask for advice about sensible regular exercise.

Eat healthily and well, following a balanced diet. You have probably lost some muscle strength already. Even if you have a weight problem you will have lost muscle, not necessarily fat. Avoidance of excessive calories is important, especially if you are taking steroids. Please take advice from the dieticians about following a balanced diet.

Further Information

Vasculitis UK: <http://www.vasculitis-uk.org.uk/>

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 8264 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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Document History

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Contact Tel No	28264
Published	July 2007
Reviewed	Sep 2009, Jan2012, Dec 2013, Jan 2016, March 2018
Review	March 2020
Version	5
Reference No	HIC/LFT/475/07