

When tiredness and persistent sneezing are signs of a killer disease



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Most diseases come unannounced. They leave slight trails and weak hints before transforming into noticeable glaring signs. But more dangerous are those that mislead diagnosis with their symptoms. One such deadly disease is Wegener's.

One of the rarest diseases, Wegener's granulomatosis is a type of inflammation that targets

the arteries, veins and capillaries of the kidneys and the respiratory system. Dr. Salil Bendre, Head of Department, Pulmonary Medicine, Nanavati Super Speciality Hospital, Vile Parle, Mumbai explains, "It is a disease characterized by antibodies formed against the smaller blood vessels of our body. It affects different parts of the body like nose, ears, joints, kidneys, lungs, skin. It primarily targets the blood vessels of the kidneys and respiratory system."

cut off blood supply to vital organs, eventually causing them to fail. The disease can be fatal if not diagnosed and treated in time.

Why it happens?

The scariest detail about Wegener's is that its causes are not yet fully known. Some studies indicate that the cause may be related to the immune system cells attacking blood vessel cells in the body but nothing can be said with surety.

Dr Madhuri Behari, HOD, Department of Neurology, Fortis Ft. Lt. Rajan Dhall Hospital, Vasant Kunj, opines, "We do not know the exact cause of Wegener's. It is an immune reaction from an unknown antigen that causes inflammation of the blood vessels. If you look at the symptoms, they are very non-specific." No definite reason is known for this disease. Infection and stress are suspected to be the precipitating cause but no definite association has been found till now, adds Dr Waheed Zaman, Senior Consultant Urology and Renal Transplantation, Head of Renal transplant unit, Max Super Speciality Hospital, Shalimar Bagh, New Delhi.

Common symptoms

While the broad symptoms of Wegener's will depend on the blood vessels that are affected but the symptoms may include:

Fatigue

Unexplained weight loss

Recurrent fever

Breathlessness

Persistent cough

Painful joints and muscles

Chronic runny nose

Sinusitis (sinus inflammation, blockage and pain)

Traces of blood in nasal mucus, sputum or urine chest discomfort.

The symptoms depend on which organ is damaged. In severe cases, the patient may develop kidney failure or even bleeding from the lungs.

Why is it difficult to diagnose?

It is difficult to diagnose because the symptoms are very common and non-specific in the initial stages. If you consider its common symptoms like running nose, joint pains as well as cough, they are difficult to relate these symptoms to Wegener's. Many people have joint pains, cold and cough so, they may be ignored initially. Only when a patient develops bleeding through the nose or cough that an x-ray of the chest is taken, adds Dr Bendre.

Since most of the early symptoms are similar to milder and more common respiratory problems, a person suffering from Wegener's often has symptoms for months before the correct diagnosis is made.

Wegener's being an uncommon disease gets diagnosed very late. It is usually a diagnosis of exclusion and the family physician may not suspect it at the first instance.

Dr Rajesh Chawla, Pulmonologist at Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, Delhi says, "It is a very uncommon disease. We hardly get 2-3 patients a year suffering from Wegener's. Also, such cases do not always come to one specialist since it involves various organs. Whatever organ is most affected, the patient is routed to that specialist. If it is bleeding from the nose, the patient is referred to a rheumatologist, if it concerns lungs, the patient comes to us or if it concerns lungs, they go to nephrologists." He suggests people who suffer from persistent health problems (like the ones mentioned in the symptoms) should undergo ANCA test and biopsy to rule out Wegener's.

It can occur in people across age group. "The peak age group affected is from 30 to 60 years. It appears to affect men and women equally with predominance in white population," adds Dr Zaman.