An Overview of Guillain-Barré Syndrome

What Is Guillain-Barré Syndrome?

Guillain-Barré (Ghee-yan Bah-ray) syndrome (GBS), also called acute idiopathic polyneuritis and Landry’s ascending paralysis, is an inflammatory disorder of the peripheral nerves, those outside the brain and spinal cord. It is characterized by the rapid onset of weakness and often paralysis of the legs, arms, breathing muscles and face. Abnormal sensations often accompany the weakness.

Many patients require intensive care during the early course of their illness, especially if support of breathing with a machine is required. Although most people recover, this can take months, and some may have long-term disabilities of varying degrees. Less than 5 percent die. GBS can develop in any person at any age, regardless of gender or ethnic background.

How Is GBS Diagnosed?

Quite often, the patient’s symptoms and physical exam are sufficient to indicate the diagnosis. The rapid onset of (ascending) weakness, frequently accompanied by abnormal sensations that affect both sides of the body similarly, is common. Loss of reflexes, such as the knee jerk, is usually found. To confirm the diagnosis, a lumbar puncture to find elevated fluid protein and electrical tests of nerve and muscle function may be performed.

How Is GBS Treated?

Because progression of the disease in its early stages is unpredictable, most newly diagnosed patients are hospitalized and usually placed in an intensive care unit to monitor breathing and other body functions.

Care involves use of general supportive measures for the paralyzed patient and also methods specifically designed to speed recovery, especially for those patients with major problems, such as inability to walk.

Plasma exchange (a blood “cleansing” procedure) and high doses of intravenous immune globulin are often helpful to shorten the course of GBS.

Most patients, after their early hospital stay and when medically stable, are candidates for a rehabilitation program to help regain muscle strength as nerve supply returns.

What Causes GBS?

The cause of GBS is not known. Perhaps 50 percent of cases occur shortly after a viral or bacterial infection such as a sore throat or diarrhea. Many cases developed in people who received the 1976 swine flu vaccine. Current theories suggest an autoimmune mechanism in which the patient’s defense system of antibodies and white blood cells are triggered to damage the nerve covering or insulation, leading to weakness and abnormal sensations.

Need Help?

If you have GBS or know someone who does and would like assistance or information, contact the Guillain-Barré Syndrome Foundation International. If you would like to form a local support group chapter or learn of local physicians who are familiar with GBS, contact us. If you are a healthcare professional and would like literature or emotional support for your patients, feel free to contact us. We are here to serve you.

610-667-0131  Fax 610-667-7036
www.gbsfi.com  info@gbsfi.com

Reprinted with permission from the Guillain-Barré Syndrome Foundation International.