SARCOIDOSIS AND THE LUNGS

Made with Prof. S Birring, Dr K Myall and Dr A Patel. Respiratory, and Dr K Bechman, Rheumatology, King's College Hospital.

Sarcoidosis can affect any organ in the body. About 90% of the time, it involves the lungs or lymph glands in the lungs. This is known as 'pulmonary' sarcoidosis.

How sarcoidosis affects the lungs

In pulmonary sarcoidosis, clusters of immune cells (known as 'granuloma') gather in the lungs and disrupt the transfer of oxygen.

These granulomas can lead to scarring, making it hard for the lungs to stretch and reducing their capacity. This can cause a loss of working lung tissue, leading to shortness of breath.

Furthermore, granulomas might form around the lungs' lymphatic (or 'lymph') system, which is part of the immune system circulating immune cells throughout the body.

The outlook

Sarcoidosis affects people differently and often follows an unpredictable course. Most people with pulmonary sarcoidosis recover within a few years, and some don't even need treatment. However, others can be more severely affected with symptoms worsening over time and may require more prolonged treatment. This is called chronic sarcoidosis.

Symptoms of pulmonary sarcoidosis

For some people, the symptoms of pulmonary sarcoidosis start suddenly and don't last very long. In other people, symptoms may develop gradually and may last for many years.

Some people don't have any symptoms and only find out they have pulmonary sarcoidosis during a routine chest X-ray or other tests.

Common symptoms:
- feeling very tired and washed out.
- shortness of breath, especially with exercise
- dry and persistent cough
- chest pain

Treating pulmonary sarcoidosis

There is no cure for sarcoidosis. When treatment is needed, its aim is to stop lung inflammation and scarring, prevent the disease from worsening, ease symptoms, and improve quality of life.

- corticosteroids (commonly called prednisolone) are often used to treat sarcoidosis.
- steroid sparing medications such as methotrexate, mycophenolate and azathioprine are sometimes used with corticosteroids.

Techniques to diagnose sarcoidosis

Sarcoidosis can be difficult to diagnose, particularly if the symptoms aren't obvious. You might need several tests or scans to diagnose it.

These can include:
- X-rays
- lung function tests, including spirometry tests, lung volume tests, gas transfer tests
- CT scans
- PET scans
- MRI scans
- bronchoscopy

Living with pulmonary sarcoidosis

It is common that patients may feel tired and lethargic (fatigued), lose weight or suffer with fevers and night sweats.

Sometimes symptoms may suddenly get worse - this is known as a 'flare-up'. This may be triggered by stress, infections, a change in environment or, often, nothing recognisable.

It is important to make sure you eat healthily, pace yourself and talk to friends and family about your sarcoidosis. You should discuss your condition early on with your employer.

Sarcoidosis can leave patients feeling isolated - recognising mental health problems early and seeking support is important. Contact SarcoidosisUK or your GP for support.