



Vasculitis

Overview

Vasculitis involves swelling and irritation, called inflammation, of blood vessels. The inflammation can cause the walls of the blood vessels to thicken. This thickening can narrow the vessels. If the narrowing restricts blood flow, it can damage organs and tissues.

There are many types of vasculitis. Most of them are rare. Vasculitis might affect just one organ or several. The condition can be short-term or long lasting.

Vasculitis can affect anyone. But some types are more common among people in certain age groups. Some types may improve without treatment. Most types need treatment with medicines to control the inflammation and prevent flares.

Symptoms

Symptoms of most types of vasculitis can include:

- Fever.
- Headache.
- Tiredness.
- Weight loss.
- Aches and pains.

Other symptoms depend on the parts of the body affected:

- **Digestive system.** If vasculitis affects the stomach or intestines, there may be pain after eating. Ulcers and tears, called perforations, are possible. They may cause blood in the stool.
- **Ears.** Dizziness, ringing in the ears and sudden hearing loss may happen.
- **Eyes.** Vasculitis can make the eyes look red. They may itch or burn. Giant cell arteritis can cause double vision and brief or ongoing blindness in one or both eyes. This is sometimes the first sign of the disease.
- **Hands or feet.** Some types of vasculitis can cause numbness or weakness in a hand or foot. The palms of the hands and soles of the feet might swell or harden.
- **Lungs.** This can cause shortness of breath or coughing up blood.
- **Skin.** Bleeding under the skin can show up as red spots. Vasculitis also can cause lumps or open sores on the skin.

When to see a doctor

Make an appointment with your healthcare professional if you have symptoms that worry you. Some types of vasculitis get worse quickly. Early diagnosis is the key to getting treatment that works.

Causes

Experts don't know the exact cause of vasculitis. Some types are linked to a person's genes. Others result from the immune system attacking blood vessel cells by mistake. Causes of this immune system reaction may include:

- Infections, such as hepatitis B and hepatitis C.
- Blood cancers.
- Immune system diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and scleroderma.
- Reactions to certain medicines.

Risk factors

Vasculitis can happen to anyone. Factors that may increase the risk of certain types include:

- **Age.** Giant cell arteritis is rare before the age of 50. Kawasaki disease is most common in children younger than 5 years old.
- **Family history.** Behcets disease, granulomatosis with polyangiitis and Kawasaki disease can run in families.
- **Lifestyle choices.** Using illicit drugs such as cocaine can increase your risk of getting vasculitis. Smoking tobacco can increase risk of Buerger disease. This applies mainly to people assigned male at birth who are younger than 45.

- **Medicines.** Medicines such as hydralazine, allopurinol (Lopurin, Zyloprim) , minocycline (Arestin, Minocin, others) and propylthiouracil sometimes can cause vasculitis.
- **Infections.** Having hepatitis B or C can increase the risk of vasculitis.
- **Immune conditions.** People who have conditions in which their immune systems attack their own bodies by mistake may be at higher risk of vasculitis. These conditions include lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and scleroderma.
- **Sex assigned at birth.** Giant cell arteritis is much more common in people assigned female at birth. Buerger disease is more common in people assigned male at birth.

Complications

Vasculitis complications depend on the type of vasculitis and how bad it is. Complications also may be linked to side effects of the prescription medicines that treat the condition. Complications of vasculitis include:

- **Organ damage.** Some types of vasculitis can damage major organs.
- **Blood clots and aneurysms.** A blood clot may form in a blood vessel, blocking blood flow. Rarely, vasculitis causes a blood vessel to weaken and bulge, forming an aneurysm (AN-yoo-riz-um).
- **Vision loss or blindness.** This may be a complication of giant cell arteritis that isn't treated.
- **Infections.** Some of the medicines used to treat vasculitis may weaken your immune system. This can make you more prone to infections.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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