

## Sarcoidosis

Sarcoidosis causes small inflammatory nodules or granulomas to form, mainly in the lungs and chest lymph glands. It mostly affects people in their late 20s to early 40s. Symptoms include breathlessness, tiredness, a cough or chest discomfort. The cause is not known - it is not a cancer and 80 per cent of cases require no treatment. The remaining 20 per cent are usually treated with corticosteroid drugs and the granulomas dissolve away. The majority of patients overcome their illness within a year or two.

### One of the granulomatous disorders

Sarcoidosis is one of the group of conditions known as the 'granulomatous disorders'. These granulomas - groups of particular immune cells, which are normally part of the body's defence system - form in the affected tissues.

### The cause is not known

The cause of sarcoidosis is not known; however, it is not a cancer or any other sort of malignant tumour. Some theories suggest that sarcoidosis is an allergy, a reaction to an infection, or is caused by exposure to pine pollen or various fumes and dusts. None of these theories have been proven.

### Who can get sarcoidosis?

Sarcoidosis occurs in anyone and all age groups, but mainly affects people in their late 20s to early 40s. Approximately one in 10,000 people have this condition. It occurs more commonly in some families, and a link to genes is suspected. The disease is more common and severe in black people than among Caucasians, and is unusual in people of Asian descent or among Australian Aborigines.

### Symptoms and effects

Sarcoidosis can affect any part of the body. It is often unexpectedly detected during a chest x-ray done for other reasons, and may show up as swollen lymph glands in the chest or shadows on the lungs. Sometimes, swollen glands are present in other places, such as in the neck. Some people develop red tender lumps on their shins, known as erythema nodosum. Sarcoidosis may also affect the eyes, liver, kidneys, heart and brain. Many patients with sarcoidosis don't have any symptoms. When symptoms **are** present, they may include:

- Breathlessness with exertion
- Tiredness
- Cough or chest discomfort
- Dry mouth and sore eyes, kidney stones and (occasionally) skin rashes
- Chest pains that are short and sharp in the sides of the chest, or dull and aching behind the breast bone.

Pregnancy is not affected by sarcoidosis, and women with sarcoidosis who become pregnant usually get a little better. Very occasionally, the disease gets worse after the baby is born.

### Sarcoidosis usually does not require treatment

Most patients (eight out of ten) with sarcoidosis need no treatment because the granulomas go away by themselves over several years. The remaining 20 per cent of patients are usually treated with corticosteroid drugs, which cause the granulomas to dissolve. The length of treatment varies, depending on the response.

Some people suffer from tiredness and lethargy for a considerable period and this may be difficult to treat. The majority of patients with sarcoidosis get over their illness within a year or two. If you have significant symptoms (such as breathlessness or severe coughing) or some vital organ is affected (such as the eye or lung), your doctor may advise treatment with corticosteroid drugs.

Regular medical checkups are necessary, until the condition has gone away, and follow-up checks may be needed for a number of years. Your doctor may also advise breathing tests or other tests from time to time.

### **Where to get help**

- The Australian Lung Foundation Tel. (03) 9570 3893 or 1800 654 301
- Patient support groups in Australia Tel. 1800 654 301

### **Things to remember**

- Sarcoidosis is a condition in which small inflammatory nodules or granulomas form, mainly in the lungs and chest lymph glands.
- It mostly affects those in their late 20s to early 40s.
- Symptoms include breathlessness, tiredness, a cough or chest discomfort.
- The cause is not known - it is not a cancer and eighty per cent of cases require no treatment.
- The majority of patients overcome their illness within a year or two.

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Australian Lung Foundation

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