

Pink disease

Pink disease is caused by exposure to mercury. Babies who developed pink disease were particularly sensitive to mercury. Mercury was a common additive in teething powders and other baby products like worm medicines and nappy rinses in the first half of the 20th century.

Pink disease is named after the symptom that causes bright pink colour of the hands and feet. People who survived pink disease in when they were babies may be prone to ongoing health problems.

Other names for pink disease include acrodynia, erythroedema, Feer's disease, infantile mercury (Hg) poisoning and Swift's disease.

Causes

Mercury was discovered as the cause of pink disease around 1948. The product that was commonly added to teething powder before that time was called calomel (mercurous chloride). Mercury is no longer used in baby products in Australia and pink disease is now rare.

There have been occasional reports of pink disease in people who ate wheat seed which had been treated with fungicides containing mercury and in children given teething powders imported from Southeast Asia.

Symptoms

Pink disease could take months or even years to progress. Symptoms developed as the disease progressed. Some of the stages include:

- The child becomes lethargic and loses interest in activities such as playing.
- Skin rashes come and go.
- The fingertips, toes and nose turn pink.
- The hands and feet turn deep pink with patches of blue (cyanosis).
- The sweat glands enlarge and the child tends to perspire excessively.
- Pus-filled skin eruptions develop.
- The skin peels off the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.
- The fingers and toes retain fluid and swell.
- The skin becomes itchy and painful, particularly on the hands and feet.
- Hair falls out or is pulled out.
- Affected skin may develop gangrene or ulcers.
- Pain prevents the child from sleeping.
- Nails blacken and fall off.
- The eyes are inflamed and the child becomes hypersensitive to light.
- The teeth loosen and fall out.
- The child drools excessively.
- The muscles and ligaments become lax and soft, and the child may not want to walk.
- Diarrhoea and prolapse of the rectum can occur.
- Death was not uncommon from this distressing condition

Ongoing health problems for survivors

People who survived pink disease in their infancy may be prone to ongoing health problems such as bronchiectasis, bronchitis, sinusitis, chemical sensitivities and infertility.

In 1993, a condition called Young's syndrome (obstruction of sperm transport in men with chronic chest disease and sinusitis) was reported in men, many of whom had suffered from pink disease as children.

Mercury is a hazardous substance

At high levels, mercury can damage the brain, kidneys and developing fetus. A child is more vulnerable to the harmful effects of mercury because their brains are still growing.

In the 1950s, large outbreaks of mercury poisoning occurred in Japan from industrial discharges of mercury into waterways, which contaminated fish eaten by those affected (Minamata disease).

Sources of mercury include:

- Some large fish, which can accumulate mercury (for example shark and swordfish)
- Some medications and alternative medicine products
- Dental amalgam fillings (during placement and removal mercury vapour can be released)
- Damaged mercury thermometers
- Damaged fluorescent light bulbs, including 'low energy' globes.

Where to get help

- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Mercury used to be a common additive in teething powders and other baby products early last century.
- Babies who were particularly sensitive to mercury developed pink disease, a syndrome with symptoms including painful limbs, irritability, lethargy, light sensitivity and skin rash with bright pink colour of hands and feet.
- Once mercury was discovered as the cause of pink disease it was withdrawn from baby products.
- Survivors of pink disease may be prone to ongoing health problems.

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