Guillain-Barré syndrome
Guillain-Barré syndrome is a form of nerve inflammation. The cause is unknown, but most cases seem to be triggered by a bacterial or viral illness. Most people recover, but it may take six months to two years or more. There is no cure for Guillain-Barré syndrome.

Guillain-Barré syndrome is an autoimmune condition in which the person’s nerves are attacked by the body’s own immune defence system. As a result of the attack, the nerve insulation (myelin) and sometimes even the inner covered part of the nerve (axon) is damaged and signals are delayed or otherwise changed. The resultant antibodies attack the myelin sheath, and sometimes the axon, causing paralysis and muscular weakness as well as strange sensations, as the sensory nerves of the skin may be affected.

The syndrome appears to be triggered by acute viral or bacterial illnesses, such as respiratory or gastrointestinal infections, occurring one to three weeks earlier. However, other events such as pregnancy, dengue fever, surgical procedures, insect bites and Bell’s palsy have also been shown to cause GBS.

Usually, the symptoms start in the feet or legs and progress up the body over a few days or weeks. The disorder can be mild, moderate or severe, with life support needed in the worst cases. The exact cause is unknown and there is no known cure. Most people spontaneously recover, although some will be left with permanent disabilities.

This rare illness strikes between two and eight people in every 100,000, regardless of gender or age, although it is more common in the 30 to 50 years age group. Other names for Guillain-Barré syndrome include acute idiopathic polyneuritis, acute idiopathic polyradiculoneuritis and Landry's ascending paralysis.

**Symptoms of Guillain-Barré syndrome**

The symptoms of Guillain-Barré syndrome include:

- muscle weakness and paralysis affecting both sides of the body
- jerky, uncoordinated movements
- numbness
- muscle aches, pains or cramps
- odd sensations such as vibrations, buzzing or ‘crawling’ under the skin
- blurred vision
- dizziness
- breathing problems.

The symptoms typically start in the feet or legs and progress up the body. Sometimes, the symptoms start in the arms and progress downwards. Symptoms may take a few days or weeks to progress. After the symptoms remain steady and peaked for a short time, the person starts to recover.

Recovery may take six months to two years or more.

**Effects of Guillain-Barré syndrome**

The symptoms of Guillain-Barré syndrome vary from mild to life threatening, depending on which nerves are damaged and to what extent. The nerves of the autonomic nervous system can be affected, leading to changes in blood pressure, heart rate, vision, kidney function and body temperature. Potentially fatal complications of Guillain-Barré syndrome include pneumonia, deep vein thrombosis and respiratory failure.

**Causes of Guillain-Barré syndrome**

The exact cause of Guillain-Barré syndrome remains unclear. In most cases, a person with Guillain-Barré syndrome experienced some form of viral or bacterial infection some days or weeks prior to the onset of symptoms. The most commonly identified trigger is gastrointestinal infection with *Campylobacter jejuni* – one of the most common causes of food poisoning.

Some of the viral infections associated with the syndrome include respiratory and gastrointestinal infections, herpes zoster, glandular fever and viral hepatitis. Other triggers may be surgery or insect bites. Whatever the trigger may be, the immune cells of the body are prompted to attack and destroy the insulation of the nerve cells.

There is no evidence to suggest that Guillain-Barré syndrome is contagious.

**Diagnosis of Guillain-Barré syndrome**

Guillain-Barré syndrome can be difficult to diagnose, because the symptoms may seem vague and unrelated.

Diagnosis relies on a number of tests including:

- physical examination
- muscle strength tests
- muscle activity tests
- reflex tests, such as the knee-jerk reaction
- nerve conduction velocity tests
- spinal tap, to check for higher than expected levels of protein in the cerebrospinal fluid.

**Treatment for Guillain-Barré syndrome**

The progress of the disorder is very difficult to predict. Most people diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome are hospitalised so that any complications which affect their vital functions can be treated promptly.

There is no cure, but treatment options include:

- **Plasmapheresis** – blood is taken from the person. The immune cells are removed, and the remaining red blood cells are returned to the body.
- **Gammaglobulin (IVIG)** – trials have proven the effectiveness of this form of treatment. IVIG is given by infusion into a vein, usually every day for five days. Each infusion takes about two hours.

**Long-term outlook for Guillain-Barré syndrome**

Estimates vary, but around nine out of 10 people with Guillain-Barré syndrome survive and approximately 75 to 90 per cent recover completely. Around 10 to 15 per cent will be troubled by some form of permanent disability.

Generally, the earlier the symptoms start to ease, the better the outlook. Even so, it can take anywhere from six months to two years or more to fully recover. Physical therapy is important as it prevents muscle contractures and associated deformities. Healthcare professionals involved in the person’s rehabilitation may include neurologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers and psychologists.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Guillain-Barré Syndrome Association Tel. (02) 9617 0883

**Things to remember**

- Guillain-Barré Syndrome Association syndrome is a form of nerve inflammation.
- The cause is unknown, but most cases seem to be triggered by a bacterial or viral illness.
- Most people recover, but it may take six months to two years or more.
- There is no cure for Guillain-Barré syndrome.

**References**

- Supporting persons diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) or chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIDP) or other inflammatory neuropathies, Inflammatory Neuropathy Support Group of Victoria Inc. [More information here.](#)

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• Lupus
• Autoimmune disorders

Immune system explained

• Immune system explained
  The immune system remembers every germ it has ever overcome...
• Vaccines
  Vaccines trick the body into building immunity against infectious diseases without causing the actual disease...

Lymphatic system

• Lymphatic system
  The lymphatic manages fluid levels in the body, filters out bacteria and houses types of white blood cells...
• Lymphoedema
  Women who have undergone treatment of breast cancer are particularly susceptible to lymphoedema of the arm...
• Lymphoma
  Lymphoma is a general term for a cancer that begins in the lymphatic system...

Spleen

• Spleen
  Surgically removing a diseased or damaged spleen is possible without causing any serious harm to the person...
• Splenomegaly
  Any conditions that cause a rapid breakdown of blood cells can place great strain on the spleen and make it enlarge...

Lupus

• Lupus
  Lupus can be mild or life-threatening, depending on which tissues are affected...
• Lupus and infections
  The most common infections for people with lupus include those of the respiratory tract, skin and urinary system...
• Lupus and medication
  Lupus most commonly appears in women of childbearing age...
• Lupus and pregnancy
  Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...

Autoimmune disorders

• Addison's disease
  Most cases of Addison's disease are caused by an autoimmune response that attacks and damages the adrenal glands over time...
• Autoimmune disorders
  There is generally no cure for an autoimmune disorder, but the symptoms can be managed...
• Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)
  Myalgic encephalomyelitis, commonly known as chronic fatigue syndrome, can affect people of any age, including children...
• Diabetes type 1
  Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years...
• Guillain-Barré syndrome
  Most people with Guillain-Barré syndrome experienced some form of viral or bacterial infection before the onset of symptoms...
• Henoch-Schonlein purpura
  Henoch-Schonlein purpura causes a purple spotted skin rash which lasts around one to four weeks, and is often marked by relapses...
**HIV**

In Australia, HIV is most commonly spread when having sex without a condom and when sharing needles and other injecting equipment...

**Hughes syndrome**

Hughes syndrome is thickening of the blood caused by abnormal immune system cells...

**Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP)**

Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP) is a rare autoimmune disorder in which a person’s immune system destroys the platelets that help their blood to clot...

**Lipoedema**

Lipoedema is a painful, chronic, symmetrical swelling in the legs, thighs, buttocks and sometimes arms due to the accumulation of fat in the subcutaneous tissues. The onset often occurs during puberty...

**Myasthenia gravis**

Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness...

**Polymyositis**

Polymyositis is hard to diagnose and may be mistaken for muscular dystrophy...

**Raynaud's phenomenon**

Raynaud's phenomenon can be a sign of a more serious underlying condition, so see your doctor if you experience it...

**Reactive arthritis**

Reactive arthritis is a form of arthritis that occurs as a result of some bacterial infections...

**Retroperitoneal fibrosis**

Retroperitoneal fibrosis is the abnormal growth of tissue on and around abdominal structures, including blood vessels and ureters...

**Rheumatoid arthritis**

Early treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is important in helping you manage the condition more effectively...

**Scleroderma**

The most common symptom of scleroderma is a thickening and hardening of the skin, particularly of the hands and face...

**Sjogren’s syndrome**

Sjogren’s syndrome can be managed with medications and products such as artificial tears and saliva...

**Thyroid - Hashimoto's disease**

Hashimoto's disease progresses very slowly over many years, so the symptoms may go unnoticed...

**Thyroid - hyperthyroidism**

Hyperthyroidism can be diagnosed with a simple blood test that measures thyroid hormone levels...

**Related Information**

- **Pins and needles**
  
Pins and needles is a sensation of uncomfortable tingling or prickling, usually felt in the hands or feet...

- **Sjogren's syndrome**
  
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- **Retroperitoneal fibrosis**
  
Retroperitoneal fibrosis is the abnormal growth of tissue on and around abdominal structures, including blood vessels and ureters...

- **Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP)**
  
Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP) is a rare autoimmune disorder in which a person's immune system destroys the platelets that help their blood to clot...

- **Neuralgia**
  
Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn’t an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder...

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Guillain-Barré Syndrome

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This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Guillain-Barre Syndrome Association

GBS CIDP
Guillain-Barré Syndrome
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Last updated: May 2014

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