Sarcoidosis
Sarcoidosis
Summary

- Sarcoidosis is a condition in which abnormal nodules, called sarcoid granulomas, appear in the body’s tissues.
- The lungs are most commonly affected, causing symptoms such as coughing and shortness of breath.
- Most people get better within one to three years and may not need any medical treatment other than close observation by their doctor.

Sarcoidosis is a condition in which abnormal nodules, called sarcoid granulomas, appear in the body’s tissues. Sarcoidosis can involve any organ in the body, but affects the lungs or the lymph nodes of the chest in about 90 per cent of cases. It can develop at any age, but mostly affects people in their late 20s to early 40s.

Sarcoidosis is not cancer, and is not related to tuberculosis, which is a serious and potentially fatal bacterial infection of the lungs. Most people get better within one to three years and may not need any medical treatment other than close observation by their doctor.

Symptoms of sarcoidosis

Many patients with sarcoidosis don’t have any symptoms. The condition may be diagnosed by chance during medical tests for an unrelated health problem. When symptoms do occur, they depend on which body part is affected.

Typical symptoms may include:
- Cough
- Fever
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Tiredness and lethargy
- Facial swelling
- Arthritis, particularly of the large joints
- Painful red lumps called erythema nodosum on the front of the legs.

Sarcoid granulomas

The small inflammatory nodules present in sarcoidosis are known as sarcoid granulomas. They comprise groups of immune cells, which are normally part of the body’s defence system. Sarcoidosis usually affects the lungs or the lymph nodes near the lungs. The reason for this is not known. Lymph nodes elsewhere in the body such as the neck or armpits may be involved. In about 10 per cent of cases, sarcoidosis can involve other organs or tissues within the body, including the salivary glands, liver, eyes or skin.

Complications of sarcoidosis

Occasionally, sarcoidosis may develop in the brain or heart, which can lead to serious complications:
- If the brain is affected, symptoms may include headaches, weakness, numbness, and blurred vision
- If the heart is affected, symptoms may include palpitations, dizziness or chest pain.

Very occasionally, sarcoidosis can trigger high levels of calcium in the blood, causing thirst and kidney damage. An increase in calcium levels in the urine can put the person at risk of kidney stones.

Cause of sarcoidosis

The cause of sarcoidosis is not known. It appears to be more common in cooler climates, but the reason for this is unclear. Occasionally, sarcoidosis runs in families, which suggests that genes may play an important role. Current thinking suggests that the cause may be an infective agent or an allergy working in combination with susceptible genes. However, there is no evidence to support this theory. Research is ongoing.

Diagnosis of sarcoidosis

Sarcoidosis can usually be diagnosed on the basis of symptoms, x-ray results and blood tests, although it is sometimes difficult to diagnose. It is important to differentiate sarcoidosis from other conditions that can enlarge the lymph glands and cause shadows on chest x-rays.

In most cases, however, the doctor will want to confirm the diagnosis with a biopsy. Lung biopsies are performed using a fibre-optic bronchoscope placed down the trachea via the mouth. Sometimes, the bronchoscope is inserted into a small incision in the neck or between the ribs. The biopsy specimen is sent to a pathologist, who examines it under the microscope.

Your doctor may wish to arrange for other medical tests such as:

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Blood tests
Urine tests
Breathing tests
Electrocardiogram (ECG)
Echocardiogram (ECHO)
CT scans
Neurological tests
Eye tests.

Treatment for sarcoidosis

In Australia, sarcoidosis is usually a mild condition. Most patients get better within one to three years and may not need any medical treatment at all. However, your doctor will wish to monitor you closely during your recovery, so expect regular health checkups. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist.

Medical treatment is needed in serious or progressive cases. Steroid medication, such as prednisolone or cortisone, is the most common therapy. Rarely, other drugs may be needed. Initially, the dose of steroids may be high. The dose can often be reduced once the condition is under control.

Once sarcoidosis appears to be improving, relapse is rare unless the medication is stopped. Never suddenly stop taking the medication. When resolved, sarcoidosis rarely returns.

Long-term outlook for sarcoidosis

About one person in three with sarcoidosis will have some degree of organ damage. Without treatment, chronic and severe sarcoidosis of the heart, brain or lungs can have serious health consequences, including death. However, it is important to remember that serious complications are rare in Australia. Most people recover fully and have no lasting ill effects. Discuss any concerns and fears with your doctor or specialist.

Your doctor can recommend lifestyle changes, if necessary. Occasionally, too much sunshine can cause high calcium levels in the blood and urine, which can lead to kidney problems. If you are a smoker, you should quit. Generally speaking, you can expect to lead a normal active life.

Pregnancy is not affected by sarcoidosis. Women with the condition who become pregnant usually get a little better. Very occasionally, the condition worsens after the baby is born.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Lung Foundation Australia Tel. 1800 654 301

References

- Sarcoidosis (pdf), Lung Foundation Australia. More information here.

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Lungs

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- Lung basics
- Environmental concerns
- Lung infections
- Lung conditions
- Breathing difficulty

Lung basics

- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)
  
  CPR is a life-saving skill that everyone should learn from an accredited organisation...

- e-cigarettes
  
  What do the experts say about electronic cigarettes. Electronic cigarettes – or e-cigarettes – simulate the act of smoking, but you don’t burn tobacco when you use them...

- Pulmonary hypertension
  
  Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs...

- Respiratory system
  
  The respiratory system takes up oxygen from the air we breathe and expels the unwanted carbon dioxide...

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Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. 

Smoking - effects on your body

Along with nicotine, people who smoke inhale about 7,000 other chemicals in cigarette smoke. Many of these chemicals come from burning tobacco leaf. Some of these compounds are chemically active and...

What to expect when you quit smoking

When you decide to quit smoking, it can help to find out what to expect as you work through the process. Some people have only a few mild symptoms when they quit but others find it harder. While...

Environmental concerns

Air pollution

Around 75 per cent of Melbourne's air pollution is caused by vehicle emissions.

Asbestos and your health

When asbestos fibres become airborne, people working with asbestos may inhale particles which remain in their lungs.

Aspergillus

Aspergillus is a fungus that commonly grows on rotting vegetation. It can cause asthma symptoms.

Bushfire smoke

Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health.

Cadmium

Low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body.

Disease clusters

Disease clusters are rare but can cause community concern about the possible effects of exposure to environmental hazards.

Passive smoking

Passive smoking means breathing other people's second-hand tobacco smoke. Passive smoking increases the risk of serious illness in both children and adults.

Smoke from planned burns

Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of bushfires.

Wood fires and breathing problems

The smoke from wood fires can affect air quality and may affect people's health.

Lung infections

Bronchiolitis

Bronchiolitis is a common chest infection in babies under six months of age.

Flu (influenza)

Influenza (the flu) is caused by a virus. The flu is more than just a bad cold and can occasionally lead to serious complications, including death. Specific antiviral medication is available. It is...

Legionnaires' disease

Legionnaires' disease is a rare form of pneumonia.

Pleurisy

Treating any infection of the upper respiratory tract quickly will reduce the risk of developing pleurisy.

Pneumonia

Anyone can get pneumonia, but young children and the elderly are most susceptible.

Psittacosis - parrot fever

People who have birds as pets, poultry workers and anyone working in aviaries or pet shops, are most at risk of catching psittacosis.
Tuberculosis (TB)

Tuberculosis is spread when a person with an active infection coughs, laughs, sings or sneezes.

Tuberculosis treatment

Tuberculosis can be cured in almost all cases by taking the medications for the full course of treatment, usually at least six months.

Whooping cough

The major symptom of whooping cough is a severe cough, which is often followed by a ‘whooping’ sound.

Whooping cough – a family’s experience (video)

A family shares their experience when their baby daughter contracted whooping cough (or pertussis).

Lung conditions

- **Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - diagnosis (video)**
  Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a serious, progressive and disabling condition that limits airflow in the lungs. Hear from individuals who have been diagnosed.

- **Cystic fibrosis (CF)**
  When a person has cystic fibrosis, their mucus glands secrete very thick sticky mucus that clogs the tiny air passageways in the lungs and traps bacteria.

- **Emphysema**
  Emphysema is generally caused by cigarette smoking or long-term exposure to certain industrial pollutants or dusts.

- **Granulomatosis with polyangiitis**
  Granulomatosis with polyangiitis (GPA), formerly known as Wegener granulomatosis is a rare condition that targets the arteries, veins and capillaries of the kidneys and the respiratory system.

- **Lung cancer**
  Lung cancer occurs most often in adults between the ages of 40 and 70 who have smoked cigarettes for at least 20 years.

- **Lung conditions - chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)**
  Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is the collective term for a number of lung diseases that prevent proper breathing.

- **Lymphangioleiomyomatosis (LAM)**
  Lymphangioleiomyomatosis (LAM) is a rare lung disease that can affect women during their reproductive years.

- **Mesothelioma**
  Mesothelioma is a rare type of cancer that can develop decades after exposure to asbestos.

- **Nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) lung disease**
  NTM lung disease is a serious disease caused by bacteria commonly found in soil and water. It can cause damage to the lungs and make people very ill.

- **Pulmonary hypertension**
  Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs.

- **Sarcoidosis**
  Sarcoidosis is not a cancer or any other sort of malignant tumour.

- **Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)**
  Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. Treatment.

Breathing difficulty

- **Asthma explained**
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

- **Choking**
  Don't slap a choking person on the back while they are upright - gravity may cause the object to slip further down their windpipe.

- **Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - diagnosis (video)**
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a serious, progressive and disabling condition that limits airflow in the lungs. Hear from individuals who have been diagnosed.

- Coughing and wheezing in children
  Coughing and wheezing in babies can be distressing for you and your baby, but in most cases symptoms can be relieved at home.

- Croup
  Croup is a viral infection of the throat and windpipe that causes noisy breathing, a hoarse voice and a harsh, barking cough.

- Pulmonary hypertension
  Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs.

- Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)
  Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. Treatment.

- Sleep apnoea
  A person with sleep apnoea may wake hundreds of times every night.

Related Information

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Home

Related information on other websites

- Lung Foundation Australia.
- National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, (USA).

Support Groups

- Lung Foundation Australia

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