

POLYMYALGIA RHEUMATICA or TEMPORAL ARTERITIS

(Giant Cell Arteritis; Cranial Arteritis)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Inflammatory disease of the large arteries, especially those in the head and neck. Symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica and temporal arteritis are the same, so the two diseases may be identical. They usually affect adults over age 50 and occur 4 times more often in women than in men.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The following symptoms may resemble those of an infection such as influenza.

- Low fever.
- Muscle stiffness, aches and pains, especially in the morning. The muscles involved are usually those of the trunk, upper arms and legs.
- Severe, throbbing headache (usually in one temple).
- Redness, swelling, tenderness and pulsating nodules along the temporal artery on one side of the head.
- Appetite loss.

CAUSES

An autoimmune disorder in which the body's immune system attacks and destroys its own tissues (especially connective tissue). The underlying cause is unknown.

RISK INCREASES WITH

Adults over age 60, especially women.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

No specific preventive measures.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Usually curable, but relapse is possible.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Without treatment: Loss of vision (if blood vessels to the eyes are involved, it's an emergency); coronary artery disease; stroke; poor blood circulation to the arms and legs.
- With treatment: Cortisone drugs may be necessary for many months. Complications of long-term cortisone use are significant, including osteoporosis and peptic ulcer disease.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include laboratory studies, such as sedimentation rate, white-blood-cell count and blood tests for anemia, and biopsy (removal of a small amount of tissue or fluid for laboratory examination) of the temporal artery and muscle.

- Treatment is with corticosteroid drugs.
- Treatment is also for any medical problems associated with polymyalgia. These may include heart disease, high blood pressure or decreased blood supply to the bowel.
- Surgery, if the bowel develops intestinal gangrene.
- For headache relief, apply heat to the painful side of the head. For muscle stiffness, apply heat directly to the affected area.
- Additional information available from the Arthritis Foundation, 1314 Spring Street N.W., Atlanta, GA 30309, (800) 283-7800.

MEDICATIONS

- Cortisone drugs in high doses until the acute phase ends. These dramatically relieve symptoms by altering the inflammation causing them. For continuing treatment with cortisone, the lowest possible single dose taken every other day may keep symptoms under control.
- Immunosuppressive drugs, either alone or with corticosteroids, if other treatment is not successful.
- Heart medications (if the heart is involved).
- Antihypertensive drugs (if high blood pressure is part of the problem).

ACTIVITY

No restrictions.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of polymyalgia rheumatica or temporal arteritis.
- The following occur during treatment:
 - Temperature of 101° F (38.3° C).
 - Blood in the urine.
 - Shortness of breath.
 - Chest pain.
 - Bloody bowel movements.
 - Severe abdominal pain.
 - Any illness with fever.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.