

**BASIC INFORMATION****DESCRIPTION**

A widespread connective tissue disease in which the skin and other body parts gradually degenerate, thicken and become stiff. It can involve the skin; joints; digestive system, especially the esophagus; heart; kidneys; lungs; blood vessels; fingers; and toes. It affects adults of both sexes, but is more common in women between ages 30 and 50.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Fingers - hardening and thickening of the skin, stiffness, poor circulation, numbness and fingertip ulceration.
- Digestive system - swallowing difficulty, poor food absorption, bloating after eating, weight loss, heartburn and a feeling that food sticks in the chest.
- Skin - hardening and thickening, especially in the face, which becomes tight and loses its elasticity.
- Muscle aches.
- Weakness and fatigue.
- Joint pain, stiffness and swelling.
- Anemia.

CAUSES

Unknown, but may be an autoimmune disorder. The connective tissue (the framework for all body tissues and blood vessels) thickens, becoming stiff and inflexible.

RISK INCREASES WITH

Unknown.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Cannot be prevented at present.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The course of the disorder is variable and unpredictable. It is often slowly progressive and affects the heart, lungs and kidneys.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Poor wound healing and gangrene.
- Bleeding tendencies.
- Heart-rhythm disturbances.
- Congestive heart failure.
- Kidney failure.
- High blood pressure.
- Lung destruction.

**TREATMENT****GENERAL MEASURES**

• Diagnostic tests may include laboratory blood tests to detect anemia and measure antibodies; urinalysis to detect red cells in the urine; ECG (electrocardiogram: a method of diagnosing heart diseases by measuring electrical activity of the heart); X-rays of the hands, esophagus and chest; lung function tests; barium enema; and skin biopsy.

• Home care usually. Rarely, hospitalization for heart, lung or kidney complications or for surgical procedure (e.g., on the esophagus).

• Treatment program will vary depending on type and severity of symptoms.

• Because of poor circulation, wear warm clothing, especially socks and gloves. Avoid exposure to extreme cold. Be wary of air conditioning.

• Protect yourself from burns and cuts.

• Sleep on 2 or 3 pillows, or raise the head of your bed 5 to 8 inches to prevent stomach acid from rolling back into the esophagus.

• Learn biofeedback techniques to increase circulation to the extremities.

• Don't smoke.

• Seek psychotherapy or counseling to adjust to living with an incurable disease.

• Use heat to relieve joint stiffness.

• Additional information available from the Scleroderma Association, P.O. Box 910, Lynnfield, MA 01940, (508) 535-6600 or the Scleroderma Federation, 1182 Teaneck Rd., Teaneck, NJ 07666, (201) 837-9826.

MEDICATIONS

• You may take non-prescription antacids to relieve heartburn or indigestion, and aspirin or ibuprofen to relieve muscle aches and joint pain.

• Use skin lotions, lubricants and bath oil to soften skin.

• Cortisone drugs to relieve inflammatory symptoms, antibiotics to fight infections, or drugs to lower blood pressure may be prescribed.

• Other medications may be prescribed depending on complications.

ACTIVITY

• Be as active as your strength permits; avoid fatigue.

• Regular exercise (or movement) can help keep the skin flexible, maintain good blood circulation, and prevent fixed joints.

DIET

Eat frequent, small meals to minimize bloating, heartburn and gastrointestinal discomfort. A soft diet is sometimes recommended. Use additional fluids to help with swallowing. A dietitian can help plan a nutritious diet.

**NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF**

• You or a family member has symptoms of scleroderma.

• The following occur during treatment:

Unexplained bruising or bleeding under the skin.

Slow healing of a wound.

Any sign of infection (fever, pus in wound, etc.).