Cushing's Syndrome

Cushing's syndrome, also called hypercortisolism, is a rare endocrine disorder characterized by a variety of *symptoms* (problems) and physical abnormalities. It may be caused by either prolonged exposure of the body's tissues to high levels of the hormone cortisol or by the overproduction of cortisol in the body. Cortisol is a natural substance produced by the adrenal gland. It can also be produced synthetically. Common features of Cushing's syndrome include upper body obesity, severe fatigue and muscle weakness, high blood pressure, backache, elevated blood sugar, easy bruising, and bluish-red stretch marks on the skin. In women, there may be increased growth of facial and body hair, and menstrual periods may become irregular or stop completely. Exposure to too much cortisol can occur for different reasons such as long-term use of glucocorticoid hormones to treat inflammatory illnesses; pituitary adenomas *(benign* (non cancerous) *tumors* (lumps) of the pituitary glands) which secrete increased amounts of adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH); ectopic ACTH syndrome (a condition in which ACTH is produced by various types of potentially *malignant* (cancerous) tumors that occur in different parts of the body); and adrenal tumors (tumors of the adrenal glands).

TREATMENT

Treatment of Cushing's syndrome depends on the cause of the overproduction of cortisol. If the cause is long-term use of a medication being used to treat another disorder, the physician may reduce the dosage until symptoms are under control. Surgery or radiotherapy may be used to treat pituitary adenomas. Surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or a combination of these may be used to treat ectopic ACTH syndrome. The aim of treatment is to cure the hypercortisolism and to eliminate any tumor that threatens the individual's health, while minimizing the chance of endocrine deficiency or long-term dependence on medications.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

The *prognosis* (likely outcome) for individuals with Cushing's syndrome varies depending on the cause of overproduction of cortisol. With treatment, most individuals with Cushing's syndrome show significant improvement, while improvement for others may be complicated by various aspects of the causative illness. Some kinds of tumors may recur. Most cases of Cushing's can be cured.

RESEARCH BEING DONE

NINDS supports research on Cushing's syndrome aimed at finding new ways to diagnose, treat, and cure the disorder.

Research is continually being done to learn more about this problem.

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