Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome

Wernicke's encephalopathy is a degenerative brain disorder. It is caused by the lack of thiamine. This is vitamin B1. It may be a result of:

- Alcohol abuse.
- Dietary deficiencies.
- Prolonged vomiting.
- Eating disorders.
- Effects of chemotherapy.

Symptoms include:

- Mental confusion.
- Vision impairment.
- Stupor.
- Coma.
- Hypothermia.
- Hypotension.
- Ataxia.

Korsakoff's amnesic syndrome is a memory disorder. It also results from a lack of thiamine. It is associated with alcoholism. The heart, vascular, and nervous system are involved. Symptoms include:

- Amnesia.
- Confabulation.
- Attention deficit.
- Disorientation.
- Vision impairment.

There are 2 main features of this syndrome. They are the impairments in being able to:

- Acquire new information or establish new memories.
- Retrieve previous memories.

Wernicke's and Korsakoff's may seem to be two different disorders. But they are generally considered to be different stages of the same disorder. This disorder is called *Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome*. Wernicke's is the “acute” phase of the disorder. Korsakoff's is the "chronic" phase.

TREATMENT

Treatment involves:

- Replacement of thiamine.
- Providing proper nutrition and hydration.

In some cases, drug therapy is also recommended.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Most symptoms can be reversed if detected and treated promptly. But improvement in memory function is slow. It is usually incomplete. Without treatment, these disorders can be disabling. They can even be life-threatening.

RESEARCH BEING DONE

The NINDS supports research on neurological disorders. This includes all of the disorders listed above. The research is aimed at finding ways to prevent them. The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism also supports research on these disorders.

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

Provided by: The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Document Released: 12/08/2003 Document Re-Released: 03/16/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.