Sydenham Chorea

Sydenham chorea is also called St. Vitus dance. It is a childhood movement disorder. It causes rapid, irregular, aimless, involuntary movements of the muscles of the limbs, face, and trunk. It typically has an onset between the ages of 5 and 15. Girls are affected more often than boys.

CAUSES

The disorder is considered a manifestation of rheumatic fever (*streptococcal infection*). The chorea is believed to result from an autoimmune mechanism. This happens when the streptococcal infection causes the body to make antibodies to specific brain regions. The disorder may strike up to 6 months after the fever or infection has cleared.

SYMPTOMS

- Symptoms may appear gradually or suddenly. They may include:
  - Muscle weakness.
  - Decreased muscle tone (*hypotonia*).
  - Clumsiness.
- The symptoms vary in severity.

Mild cases may have:

- Restlessness.
- Facial grimacing.
- A slight degree of incoordination of movements.

Severe cases involve:

- Involuntary movements that disable the child.

TREATMENT

There is no specific treatment for this disorder. Treatment is symptomatic. It may include:

- Bed rest.
- Sedatives.
- The drug diazepam for controlling movements.
- Penicillin may also be prescribed to treat the fever or infection.
- Penicillin prophylaxis is often prescribed to avoid further infections with streptococcal bacteria.

Generally the prognosis for patients with this disorder is good. Complete recovery often occurs. The duration of the disorder varies. The average case lasts 3 to 6 weeks. At times, the course may last for several months.

RESEARCH BEING DONE

The NINDS supports research on movement disorders. This includes Sydenham chorea. The goals of this research are:

- To increase understanding of these disorders.
- To find ways to prevent them.

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

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