Paraneoplastic Syndromes

Paraneoplastic syndromes are a group of rare degenerative disorders. They are triggered by a person's immune system response to a cancerous tumor. Neurologic paraneoplastic syndromes are believed to occur when cancer-fighting antibodies (white blood cells known as T cells) attack normal cells by mistake in the nervous system. These disorders often affect middle-aged to older persons. They are most common in persons with lung, ovarian, lymphatic, or breast cancer.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms generally develop over a period of days to weeks. They also usually occur prior to tumor detection. This can complicate diagnosis. They include:

- Difficulty in walking.
- Difficulty with swallowing.
- Loss of muscle tone.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Dementia.
- Vertigo.
- Loss of fine motor coordination.
- Slurred speech.
- Memory loss.
- Vision problems.
- Seizures.
- Loss of feeling in the limbs.

TREATMENT

- The cancer is treated first.
- Then, efforts are made to decrease the autoimmune response. This may be done with:
  - Steroids (cortisone or prednisone).
  - High-dose immunoglobulin.
  - Irradiation.
- Blood cleansing (*plasmapheresis*) may ease symptoms in patients with paraneoplastic disorders.

These disorders affect the peripheral nervous system.

- Speech and physical therapy may help patients regain some functions.

There are no cures for these syndromes that result in progressive neurological damage. Generally, the presence of cancer determines the diagnosis.

Research is continually being done to learn more about these problems.

Some of this information is from: The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

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