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ARE AI DISEASES COMMON AFTER COVID-19?

A Covid-19 of autoimmune (AI) diseases following As research finds a growing incidence diagnosis, we dig deeper into their different types, symptoms and treatment

HT Cafe · 25 Aug 2022 · 04 · Shruti Shende shruti.shende@hindustantimes.com

It's been more than two years since the first case of Covid-19 was reported in the world. Yet, the extent and ways it might impact a person are still not completely known. Among these lesser known post-Covid19 complications are autoimmune (AI) diseases, ranging from arthritis to vasculitis. "There is a rise in these diseases after Covid-19 due to the dysregulation of the immune system," says Dr Sandeep Dewan, director and HOD, Critical Care Medicine, Fortis Memorial Research Institute, Gurugram.



Recent studies have also corroborated these observations. For instance, a review published in the US National Library of Medicine stated, "The clinical spectrum of autoimmune-related manifestations in patients with Covid-19 varies over a wide range from organ-specific to systemic disorders." The most common rheumatic autoimmune diseases detected during or after the infection were vasculitis (impacts the blood vessels) and arthritis (affects the joints), the research found.

AUTOIMMUNE (AI) DISEASES SUCH AS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS AND VASCULITIS ARE AMONG THE LESSER-KNOWN COMPLICATIONS AFTER A COVID-19 DIAGNOSIS, RECENT STUDIES HAVE FOUND

WHAT IS AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE?

An autoimmune disease is a condition in which our body's T and B cells, which are trained to kill foreign bodies, are not able to differentiate between internal and external proteins. As a result, they

start identifying our internal cells and tissues as foreign, and proceed to kill them.

“There are a number of autoimmune diseases found in adults, but the most common ones seen post-Covid-19 are

Guillain-Barre syndrome, arthritis, vasculitis, rheumatoid arthritis (in which small joints are affected) and lupus, where the kidneys are affected. In children, AI disease can cause MIS-C, a multisystem inflammatory syndrome,” adds Dr Dewan.

The exact reason why AI diseases are observed after a Covid-19 diagnosis is not yet known. Experts do believe, however, that it is linked to the treatment or medication prescribed to patients with severe Covid-19. “We saw more such cases when the Delta variant was dominant. No data for age is available so far. As far as gender is concerned, females seem to be more prone. However, long-term studies are needed to know the demographics, treatment and causes,” says Dr Satish Koul, director, Internal Medicine, Fortis Memorial Research Institute, Gurugram.

SYMPTOMS AND DIAGNOSIS

Fatigue, joint pains, muscle aches, swelling, low-grade fever, weakness or tingling sensation in the nerves could be some of the signs of AI diseases. Dr S Vidya Nair, senior consultant, Respiratory and Sleep Medicine, Marengo QRG Hospital, Faridabad, explains, “If a patient has joint pain and swelling, body ache, fatigue, weakness or skin redness that is not explained by common causes, then such a patient should consult a doctor. Unexplained tiredness, dry cough and headache can also be symptoms.”

A number of tests can be conducted to specify the exact diagnosis and plan treatment accordingly. “Consult your doctor for a complete evaluation. Usually, a rheumatologist or immunologist is the specialist who deals with AI diseases,” says Dr Koul.

TREATMENT

Follow up with a doctor if you experience any of the above mentioned symptoms as most AI diseases are treatable. An expert will diagnose the type of disease and give medications to regulate the immune system. “Generally, these medicines are NSAID (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) or steroids,” says Dr Dewan.

When asked about the preventive measures to stop these from occurring, he adds, “These diseases are an immune dysregulation phenomenon triggered by the Covid-19 virus with no preventive strategy. There is no specific diet to prevent it either.”