

WHAT IS SARCOIDOSIS?

Sarcoidosis is a disease in which certain inflammatory cells clump together to form nodules called granulomas. These granulomas most often form in the lungs, the skin and the eyes and can alter the structure or function of the organs involved. However in most cases, over a few years the body's immune system heals the granulomas. 20-30% of people with Sarcoidosis will develop some kind of permanent lung damage.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Often there are no symptoms, however some people may develop:

- Shortness of breath
- Cough or chest discomfort
- A flu-like illness with fever, tiredness and joint pain.
- Dry mouth
- Eye irritation.
- Painful red rash on arms and legs.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

The exact cause of sarcoidosis is not known. The current working hypothesis is that in genetically susceptible individuals sarcoidosis is caused through alteration in immune response after exposure to an environmental, occupational or infectious agent. Occasionally Sarcoidosis runs in families and most commonly affects people between the ages of 20-40, however much younger and older people have been known to have the disease. It is also not clear why sarcoidosis affects different people in different ways.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Sarcoidosis is usually diagnosed through biopsy of the affected organ; however it can sometimes be diagnosed by chest x-rays, CT scans, lung function tests, blood tests and bronchoscopies.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Most cases of Sarcoidosis improve over 1-3 years and may not need any treatment at all. The granulomas can go away by themselves. Most people with Sarcoidosis can lead a normal, active life.

Treatment, when needed, generally falls under 2 categories; maintenance of good health and drug treatment.

Maintenance of good health involves eating a well balanced diet, regular exercise, weight maintenance, ceasing to smoke and avoiding dust, gases and harsh chemicals. Drug treatments are used to relieve symptoms, reduce the inflammation of affected tissues and to reduce the impact of granuloma development. Drug treatments include corticosteroids and other immunosuppressive agents, both of which have side effects if used for an extended period of time, however often the benefits outweigh the risks.