
Behcets Disease Factsheet

Author

Dr Laurence Knott

Peer Reviewer

Dr Neil Basu & Dr David Kluth

Behçet's disease is a condition which causes ulcers in various parts of the body, most commonly the mouth and genitals. People with Behçet's disease also get inflammation of the large and small blood vessels (vasculitis).

Who gets Behçet's disease?

Behçet's disease is a rare condition in the Western world but is frequently seen in the Middle and Far East. A French survey found that 2 in 100,000 people of European origin had the disease while in Turkey, it affects over 400 people per 100,000. It usually occurs in people in their thirties and forties and is rare in childhood or over the age of 50. The number of people developing severe symptoms have dropped in recent years, although the reasons for this are unknown.

What causes Behçet's disease?

The cause is not known although it is thought to be the result of something in the environment such as pollution or germs affecting people who carry certain genes.

What are the symptoms of Behçet's disease?

Painful ulcers in the mouth are one of the commonest symptoms. They usually last for about three weeks and can return quite frequently. Ulcers can develop in the genital area and these can also be painful. Unlike other types of genital ulcers, these cannot be passed on through sexual intercourse.

You may also notice small, usually painful, red swellings on the legs called erythema nodosum. Spots that look like acne may also develop on your arms and legs and red spots may appear at sites where you have been pricked by a needle. The middle layer of your eye can become inflamed. This is called uveitis. It can affect the front or back of the eye. Cataracts can also develop.

About half the people with Behçet's disease also get swollen and painful joints. This usually affects the knees or ankles but can involve the hands, wrists, shoulders or hips.

Different types of blood vessels in your body can be affected. Inflammation of the veins in the legs can cause thrombophlebitis and a swelling of an artery called an aneurysm can occur.

Occasionally, people can get problems with their memory, balance and speech. You can get ulcers in the bowel which might cause stomach pains and diarrhoea. If you have a severe form, you can get bleeding from the rectum (back passage).

How is Behçet's disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis may be suspected by a doctor on the basis of the pattern of your symptoms. Tests are sometimes performed to help confirm the diagnosis. You may also be asked to have blood tests and scans to rule out other causes of ulcers in the body.

What is the treatment for Behçet's disease?

The treatment you are offered will depend on the severity of your illness and which part(s) of the body are affected. You may be given some steroid cream to treat mouth or genital ulcers. People with eye problems usually require steroid eye drops with or without tablets. You may find painkillers or anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen are enough to control joint pains but you may require steroid tablets as well. Other options are medicines which reduce the activity of your immune system such as azathioprine, cyclophosphamide, or anti-tumour necrosis factor (TNF) agents such as infliximab. Aneurysms and bowel complications sometimes need surgery.

Does Behçet's disease get better?

Behçet's disease tends to come and go for many years although doctors are becoming better at controlling some of the troublesome symptoms such as mouth ulcers and eye problems. Most people lead a relatively normal life between attacks but some complications such as involvement of the nervous system, heart or lungs can lead to serious health problems.

Further reading

Marh A et al, Population-based prevalence study of Behçet's disease: differences by ethnic origin and low variation by age at immigration, *Arthritis Rheum.* 2008 Dec;58(12):3951-9.

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