

Guillain-Barre Syndrome

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Guillain-Barre syndrome?

Guillain-Barre (ghee-yan bah-ray) syndrome is a rare neurological disorder that progresses quickly and can be life threatening. Most people recover, but length and degree of recovery varies. It is classified as an autoimmune disorder, where the immune system attacks components of the nervous system. Guillain-Barre is called a syndrome rather than a disease because there is no specific disease-causing agent.

Who gets Guillain-Barre syndrome?

Anyone can get Guillain-Barre syndrome, but it affects mostly adolescents and older adults.

How do people get Guillain-Barre syndrome?

It is not clear what causes the illness. In about half of cases, there is a recent history of viral or other infection. Rarely, Guillain-Barre syndrome may happen after vaccination, surgery or trauma. Guillain-Barre syndrome is not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of Guillain-Barre syndrome?

Symptoms vary from person to person.

Early symptoms include:

- numbness
- tingling in the legs on both sides of the body

In many cases, weakness spreads to the arms and upper body. The weakness may increase until muscles cannot be used at all and may result in paralysis.

How is Guillain-Barre syndrome diagnosed?

Guillain-Barre syndrome can be difficult to diagnose and there is no single diagnostic test. Multiple tests are used to check muscle weakness and reflexes, nerve sensation and sensory changes. If a health care provider suspects Guillain-Barre, samples of the patient's spinal fluid will be examined.

What is the treatment for Guillain-Barre syndrome?

Treatment may include supportive care and physical therapy. Ventilator support may be used for people with breathing problems. Plasmapheresis (a process that separates red and white blood cells from plasma and returns them to the body) and human immunoglobulin (a blood product) have been shown to limit the progression of the illness. The recovery period may be a few weeks to a few years.

Can people with Guillain-Barre syndrome pass the illness to others?

People with Guillain-Barre syndrome cannot pass the illness to others.

How can Guillain-Barre syndrome be prevented?

There is no known action that can be taken to prevent Guillain-Barre syndrome.

Where can I get more information on Guillain-Barre syndrome?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.