

Stress triggers disease flares in patients with vasculitis

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In patients with a devastating form of vasculitis who are in remission, stress can be associated with a greater likelihood of the disease flaring, according to a new study by investigators at Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS).

This is the first study to suggest that [mental health](#) is a risk factor in patients with vasculitis, a group of [autoimmune disorders](#) characterized by the inflammatory destruction of [blood vessels](#). The study, in a form of the disease known as Wegener's granulomatosis (WG), will be presented on Nov. 8 at the American College of Rheumatology's annual meeting.

"When this disease flares, people can be really sick. It often affects the lungs, kidneys, sinuses and nerves. It can cause fevers and rashes. People can die from this illness. It is a very robust, active, inflammatory disease when it is active," said Robert Spiera, M.D., director of the Vasculitis and Scleroderma Program at HSS, who led the study. "When patients are in remission, however, they can do very, very well."

He says that doctors caring for patients with this disease should be attentive to their [psychological health](#). "This study points out that mental health should be part of your medical assessment," said Dr. Spiera. "You should pay attention to the patient's mental well being and be more aggressive about intervening if a patient is in a bad place. Make sure that patients take it seriously."

Prior to this report, a few small studies had suggested that [psychological stress](#) can trigger flares of [lupus](#), another autoimmune disease, and doctors have observed that WG patients often say that stress in their lives, caused by perhaps a death of someone close or [losing a job](#), made their disease flare. To investigate this anecdotal evidence in a more quantifiable way, researchers at HSS conducted a retrospective analysis of data from the Wegener's Granulomatosis Etanercept Trial (WGET). The primary objective of this randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trial was to evaluate the safety and efficacy of using etanercept (Enbrel; Immunex Corporation) to get patients with WG into remission and maintain that remission.

All patients in this multicenter trial had active disease at the beginning of the study and most patients went into remission. Checkups occurred every three months. "We assessed their disease activity at defined time intervals, in terms of how active their vasculitis was or whether they were in remission, and we also collected information at every visit regarding the patient's physical and mental health," Dr. Spiera said. Investigators measured disease activity using the Birmingham Vasculitis Activity Score for Wegener's Granulomatosis, a validated tool. At every visit, patients also filled out the Short Form 36 Health Survey, which includes a physical and mental component. Summary scores for each component are measured on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being the healthiest.

For their [retrospective analysis](#) of WGET, HSS investigators reviewed records of all patients who had a sustained remission of at least six months (143 patients). They then reviewed data from all checkups after the time of sustained remission to assess the relationship between flare status and the physical and mental health scores from the previous visit. They found that patients were 19 percent more likely to experience a disease flare if they had a five point lower mental health score (P

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