What you need to know about Giant Cell Arteritis (GCA)

Giant cell arteritis (GCA), or temporal arteritis, is a debilitating autoimmune disease that causes severe inflammation of blood vessels, especially arteries in the head across the temples and the aorta. The prevalence of GCA has been estimated at more than 200 per 100,000 persons over the age of 50 in the United States, and increases dramatically with age. An even higher frequency has been reported in northern Europe.

GCA can be difficult to diagnose because symptoms overlap with many other conditions, often resulting in a delayed or incorrect diagnosis. The most commonly affected populations include Caucasians and those of Scandinavian descent.

There is currently no approved treatment for GCA. In fact, the last treatment advance was more than half a century ago, with the discovery that GCA responds well to the anti-inflammatory properties of steroids. High-dose steroids are currently used to treat GCA but these often cause potentially serious and long-term side effects, including cataracts, fractures, infections, high blood pressure, diabetes, bone thinning and bowel bleeding, which can all severely impact a person’s quality of life.

Rapid diagnosis and treatment are crucial to prevent the more serious complications of GCA, such as blindness, strokes and aneurysms. Current research suggests there is an increase in IL-6, a protein that plays a fundamental role in inflammation, in patients with GCA. It is thought that blocking IL-6 could reduce the inflammation of blood vessels in GCA.

GCA typically affects adults over 50 years old, and women are affected at least twice as often. The most commonly affected populations include Caucasians and those of Scandinavian descent.

The exact cause of GCA is unknown, however, genetic and environmental factors are likely contributors. Increased awareness and early diagnosis can help minimise the complications of GCA, and preserve what matters most to patients: their vision and quality of life.

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Great strides are being made in increasing our understanding of GCA, and how to best help people with this debilitating condition. Current research suggests there is an increase in IL-6, a protein that plays a fundamental role in inflammation, in patients with GCA. It is thought that blocking IL-6 could reduce the inflammation of blood vessels in GCA.

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Side effects

Common symptoms of GCA include:

- Headache
- Scalp tenderness
- Jaw pain
- Visual problems, including blindness

Other general symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Weight loss
- Fever

Symptoms of the head:

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