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The Heartbreak of Psoriasis is Real

There used to be a television commercial that made us aware of the “heartbreak of psoriasis,” but it never really told the viewing audience what psoriasis is. Before that commercial, chances are most of us had never heard of this condition. But to a great number of Americans, psoriasis is all too familiar.

Estimates place the number of people in this country with this condition at somewhere between 5.8 and 7.5 million people, or about 2 to 2.6 % of the population. Although psoriasis may occur at any age, it is mainly a disease of adults, affecting men and women equally.

Psoriasis is a skin disorder characterized by red, thickened areas on the skin, usually with silvery scales. It occurs most often on the scalp, elbows, knees, face, palms, lower back, and the soles of the feet, but it can occur anywhere on the body. It is a persistent, chronic skin condition that varies in levels of severity. Cases may be so mild that the person is unaware of its presence, or so severe it can cover 10% or more of the body and affect a person’s ability to function (for example, severe cases on the soles of the feet can impede the ability to walk) as well as his or her emotional state.

Although the cause of the disease is unknown, it has been determined that the inflammation and resulting immune response in the skin is triggered by the abnormal functioning of special white cells known as T-Cells. The psoriasis can be set off by a variety of factors, including an injury to the skin, emotional stress, some infections, and reactions to certain drugs. Once the disease is triggered, the skin begins to grow too rapidly. Normally, skin replaces itself every 28 days or so, but people with psoriasis experience an accelerated growth, with the skin replacing itself in 3 or 4 days. The body cannot shed the skin cells fast enough, and the skin cells “pile up” on the surface of the body, forming lesions. In addition to being unsightly, psoriasis can cause intense burning and itching.

Five types of psoriasis have been identified. The most common form is “plaque psoriasis,” affecting about 80% of those with this condition. Its symptoms include well-defined patches of red, raised skin. Another type of psoriasis is guttate, characterized by small, red, individual “drops” on the skin. Inverse psoriasis tends to be smooth, dry, red areas of the skin, often occurring in folds or creases and lacking scales. A person with erythrodermic psoriasis will periodically experience “widespread, fiery redness of the skin.” And pustular psoriasis most frequently occurs on the hands and feet in the form of generalized, widespread reddened areas of skin, but may involve only localized areas.

Usually, a person only experiences one type of psoriasis at a time, but each episode may present itself in a different form.

In addition to symptoms involving the skin, fingernails, and toenails, the disease may also affect the inside of the mouth and the genitals. Further, nearly 1 million people experience joint inflammation resulting in symptoms of arthritis. This is known as psoriatic arthritis. It is important to note that psoriasis is NOT contagious, but it does appear in members of the same family, suggesting a genetic propensity to develop the disease. Approximately 150,000 new cases are identified each year in the United States.

The goal in treating psoriasis is to control the rate at which the skin is shed and to reduce the inflammation. Depending on the severity of the disease, the age and lifestyle of the person affected, and the person's general health, a variety of treatments and numerous visits to a doctor may be required. Medications that are applied directly to the skin (both prescription and over-the-counter) may be recommended. Exposure to sunlight and/or ultraviolet light therapy (conducted under a doctor's supervision) may slow the rapid growth of new skin cells. And oral or injectable medications may be required.

Psoriasis can indeed cause considerable heartbreak. The physical discomfort can lead to disability and interfere with basic functions, sleeping, and walking. When hands and feet are involved, a person may be precluded from working in some occupations or participating in sports. They may be unable to care for other members of their family. The pain and disability can result in absenteeism from school and work, and the cost of ongoing, repetitive treatment can become difficult to manage. Because of its unappealing sight, people with moderate to severe psoriasis often become self-conscious and embarrassed. The resulting poor self-image and social isolation can lead to fear of rejection and depression.

However, help is available by contacting the American Academy of Dermatology at 866-503-7546 (www.aad.org), the National Psoriasis Foundation at 800-723-9166 (www.psoriasis.org), or the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases at 877-226-4267 (www.niams.nih.gov). Additional information about this and other public health concerns may be obtained by contacting the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).