

GIANT CELL ARTERITIS (TEMPORAL ARTERITIS)

WHAT IS GIANT CELL ARTERITIS?

Giant Cell (temporal) Arteritis (GCA) is a vasculitis of large vessels. It may be generalized but vessel inflammation most frequently involves vessels in the scalp and head, especially the arteries over the temples. The disease is called temporal arteritis because the temporal arteries, along the sides of the head just in front of the ears (to the temples) often become inflamed. Women, Caucasians, and individuals over 50 years of age are most commonly affected by GCA.

The onset of the symptoms in GCA tends to be gradual and includes low grade fever, fatigue, weakness and weight loss. A new headache, mild or severe, occurs in at least two-thirds of patients with the pain tending to be located over the sides of the head in front of the ears but may be frontal or occipital (back of head and neck). Nearly one-half of patients suffer from pain in the jaw after chewing (called jaw claudication). Impaired vision or permanent loss of vision is often an early manifestation of the disease.

SYMPTOMS

The most common symptoms of giant cell arteritis are head pain and tenderness — often severe — that usually affects both temples. Head pain can progressively worsen, come and go, or subside temporarily.

Generally, signs and symptoms of giant cell arteritis include:

1. Persistent, severe head pain, usually in your temple area
2. Scalp tenderness
3. Jaw pain when you chew
4. Fever
5. Fatigue
6. Unintended weight loss
7. Vision loss or double vision, particularly in people who also have jaw pain
8. Sudden, permanent loss of vision in one eye

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CAUSE

What causes these arteries to become inflamed isn't known, but it's thought to involve abnormal attacks on artery walls by the immune system. Certain unknown genes and environmental factors might increase your susceptibility to the condition.

With giant cell arteritis, the lining of arteries becomes inflamed, causing them to swell. This swelling narrows your blood vessels, reducing the amount of blood — and, therefore, oxygen and vital nutrients — that reaches your body's tissues.

TREATMENT

The main treatment for giant cell arteritis consists of high doses of a corticosteroid drug such as prednisone. Because immediate treatment is necessary to prevent vision loss, your doctor is likely to start medication even before confirming the diagnosis with a biopsy.

COPING AND SUPPORT

Learning everything you can about giant cell arteritis and its treatment can help you feel more in control of your condition. Your health care team can answer your questions, and online support groups might also be of help. Know the possible side effects of the medications you take, and report any changes in your health to your doctor.