ABOUT HUGHES SYNDROME

Associated conditions: the autoimmune family of disorders

Normally, the immune system protects the body against foreign invaders - such as viruses or bacteria - by producing antibodies that destroy these harmful germs. However, sometimes the body gets confused and, in a case of mistaken identity, it makes antibodies against itself causing an autoimmune disorder. In the case of Hughes/ antiphospholipid syndrome, the immune system produces antiphospholipid antibodies which cause the blood to clot too quickly.

We are not sure why the immune system becomes over-active and is unable to distinguish between foreign invaders and its own healthy body tissue, but there is probably a genetic tendency which is triggered by an outside factor. These triggers could include viral infections, such as glandular fever and shingles, stress, certain drugs, surgery and pregnancy.

Autoimmune disorders tend to run in families, probably due to their genetic nature, and people can often have more than one. There are more than 80 different types of autoimmune disorders which can affect all areas of the body including the eyes, digestive system, heart, glands, kidneys, lungs, muscles, joints and skin, but the main autoimmune 'cousins' of Hughes/antiphospholipid syndrome are:

- Lupus - often the autoimmune condition most closely associated with Hughes/antiphospholipid syndrome, and about 30% of lupus patients have antiphospholipid antibodies. With lupus, the autoimmune system attacks its own organs such as the lung and kidneys, and produces common symptoms such as fatigue, joint pain and skin rashes.
- Raynauds phenomenon - (usually just called Raynauds) affects the blood supply to certain parts of the body, mostly the fingers and toes. The flow of blood is blocked due to spasm and the affected area changes colour to white, then blue and purple. People can also experience pain, numbness and pins and needles. Raynauds is usually triggered by cold temperatures or by anxiety or stress.
- Sjogrens syndrome (pronounced showgrens) - present in a significant number of Hughes/ antiphospholipid syndrome patients, Sjogrens affects the white blood cells which attack the body's tear and saliva glands, reducing the amount of saliva and tears produced. This can cause dry eyes, dry mouth, digestive problems, fatigue, aches and joint pains along with other symptoms.

Other associated autoimmune disorders which can also occur in people with Hughes/antiphospholipid syndrome and their families include thyroid disease, particularly Graves' disease; scleroderma; rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis; and coeliac disease.

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