

Giant Cell Arteritis & You

What is it?



Giant Cell Arteritis (GCA) is a condition that causes inflammation in blood vessels called arteries. The most common arteries affected by GCA are in the area around the temples.

Large arteries anywhere in the body can be affected.

GCA is considered a medical emergency. That's because inflammation can damage the arteries affected, cutting off the blood supply to important organs and tissues in the body.

The cause of GCA is unknown at this time, but it is thought to be an autoimmune disease. This means that something triggers your immune system to go awry. It begins to attack the arteries and causes inflammation.



GCA is like a fire in your arteries

The word inflammation comes from the Latin word *inflammare* which means to light on fire. You can think of GCA like a fire in your arteries. Putting out the fire of GCA early is important. You want to get that fire out as quickly as possible so it doesn't cause damage. Once the damage from GCA is done it cannot be reversed.

Treating GCA aggressively is also essential. Using the same fire analogy, we've called in the fire department. Now we need to make sure we have the right tools to put out the fire. We don't want a bucket and water. We want a fire truck with a big hose. The faster we can get that fire out the less damage is done and the better things will be in the long run.

What is it going to do to me?



The first signs and symptoms of GCA are often hard to pinpoint. Usually people start feeling fatigued and generally unwell. This can feel a little like having the flu with fever, headache, and muscles that feel sore and achy. Weight loss can also occur.

Eventually, most people start to feel persistent pain around one or both temples. The temple area can become very sensitive. It can hurt to comb your hair or to lie on a pillow on the affected side. Sometimes the temporal artery can become quite visible but this is rare.

When the condition becomes severe, blood flow to areas supplied by the arteries can be cut off. This can lead to vision loss, double vision, and eventually blindness. It can also lead to stroke.

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RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about GCA and treatments for the disease. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.

What can I do about it?



GCA is a very serious disease. Left untreated it can lead to severe problems including blindness and stroke. GCA is a medical emergency that needs to be treated very quickly and aggressively. Luckily, there are effective treatments available. Even if they don't cure GCA they can make living with the condition more comfortable.

If you have GCA, your family doctor should refer you to a specialist in internal medicine or to a rheumatologist. These specialist doctors are in the best position to help you diagnose and manage your condition.

People with GCA can lead active and productive lives with the right kinds of treatment. Medications for GCA are aimed at controlling inflammation. In some people, once inflammation is brought under control the disease can go into remission. When that happens, doses of medicines can sometimes be tapered down or stopped. In other people, GCA behaves more like a chronic (long-term) disease that must be controlled with small doses of medicine on an ongoing basis.

Prednisone is a very effective medication to control the symptoms of GCA. Medications called DMARDs have also been shown to be effective in some people with GCA. Most DMARDs take some time before they begin to work (about 6-12 weeks). Taking a DMARD can help reduce the dose of prednisone that's needed to keep inflammation under control.

Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **Attend your rheumatologist appointments regularly**
- **Get your blood tests regularly as suggested by your doctor**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat GCA**