Health Bulletin

Take Heart: Hope For A Silent Disease

(NAPSA)—Imagine not being able to walk to your mailbox, climb the stairs or complete regular, everyday activities due to severe shortness of breath or dizziness. For people with pulmonary arterial hypertension, or PAH, that's the reality.

While health and wellness should always be top-of-mind, National Pulmonary Hypertension Awareness Month offers an opportunity for us to learn about PAH, a rare but life-threatening condition that is often challenging for doctors to diagnose right away.

The Problem

"PAH is a condition in which the blood vessels ("blood pipes") in the lungs become thicker, constricted or plugged, making it more difficult for the heart to pump blood through the lungs," said Dr. Francisco J. Soto of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wis. "Over time, the heart cannot keep up and less blood is pumped to the lungs to pick up oxygen, which leads to the symptoms of PAH. Eventually the heart fails, resulting in death."

For some, the disease has strained their system to such an extent that the need for a heart and/or lung transplant becomes necessary. Without treatment, patients have an average survival time of less than three years from the time of diagnosis.

No one is quite sure what causes PAH. In some cases, it appears to happen for unknown reasons, other times the condition appears to be genetic. PAH can also be caused by medical conditions such as congenital heart disease, liver disease or scleroderma. Although PAH is rare, it can happen to anyone at any age. It is most common in young women between the ages of 20 and 40 years old and there are nearly twice as many females as males with the condition.

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The Symptoms

Symptoms of PAH include extreme and progressive shortness of breath, dizziness and fainting spells. Often, active, busy adults suddenly find themselves facing a shocking and grim diagnosis because PAH usually does not become symptomatic until it's in an advanced state.

Elizabeth Bosarge, 43, had been feeling exhausted and dizzy for weeks and soon found that she was unable to climb stairs without assistance. When she went to her doctors, she was stunned to find that she had a very advanced stage of PAH.

Like Bosarge, others diagnosed with PAH have difficulty doing simple things, such as walking or standing for long periods of time.

For 27-year-old Tammie Sharp, walking from her car to her house without experiencing dizziness or nausea was nearly impossible.

Types Of Treatment

Historically, there have been limited medical options for this rare condition.

Fortunately, medical advancements for PAH have shown promise. Two oral PAH medications have been approved by the FDA and encouraging research is on the horizon.

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Many patients who receive appropriate treatment experience improvement. Bosarge has lived with PAH for the past five years, despite the fact that doctors originally told her she would only have two months to live. Sharp is no longer in need of a lung transplant.

Learn More

For more information on pulmonary arterial hypertension, visit www.PHassociation.org or speak to your doctor.