

Healthy Habits

Tips for reaching and maintaining your optimum state of health

June is National Scleroderma Awareness Month

For more than two centuries, the earliest cases of scleroderma defied both an explanation and a cure. Even today, with sufferers numbering in the hundreds of thousands, it is still widely misunderstood. Once thought of as a rare condition, scleroderma is diagnosed in more people today than muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis or cystic fibrosis.

What is scleroderma?

Scleroderma is a chronic autoimmune disease affecting the body's connective tissue. The word, scleroderma literally translates as "hard skin", one of the visible signs of the disease. Physically, it's a build-up of scar tissue that affects a person's skin and internal organs. The disease is characterized by discolored patchy skin, swelling, joint and muscle pain, shortness of breath, swallowing difficulties and a host of other maladies. Its cause and cure remain unknown.

The effects of scleroderma

Scleroderma, in its severe form, is a life-threatening disease that affects multiple organs in the body and causes them to shut down. It is a chronic and degenerative disorder with no known way to stop its progression. Research shows that scleroderma can follow one of two paths. It can progress to become an acute, life-threatening condition or it can follow an extremely slow course. At either rate, as the disease progresses, patients usually suffer from a multitude of systemic conditions which affect the lungs, heart, kidney and digestive system. A mild case can quickly become more serious if not properly treated. Prompt and proper diagnosis and treatment by qualified physicians may minimize the symptoms of scleroderma and lessen the chance for irreversible damage. Pulmonary fibrosis and malignant hypertension are leading causes of death among scleroderma victims.

The material contained in Healthy Habits is not intended to be medical advice on any particular matter. Readers should seek appropriate professional advice before acting on the basis of any information contained in this publication. This information is provided courtesy of Optima Health.



Don't turn your back on the early warning signs of scleroderma; seek prompt medical attention. Find out more at www.srfcure.org/srf/home.htm

Warning Signs

While there is currently no true cure for scleroderma it may be manageable if diagnosed early and treated promptly. Any of the following warning signs is a signal to see your primary care provider or a rheumatologist for diagnosis and appropriate treatment:

- > Skin thickness
- > Stiffness of hands and feet
- > Unexplained swelling/puffiness
- > Swallowing difficulties
- > General fatigue
- > Blanching of feet and hands from cold or stress

It is estimated that there are approximately 300,000 persons with scleroderma in the United States. Again, the exact cause or causes of scleroderma are still unknown, but scientists and medical investigators in a wide variety of fields are working hard to make those determinations. As more is known about scleroderma, more can be done to prevent new cases and ease the pain of current sufferers. With awareness, research and support, come hope, help and someday, the cure.