

Endocrine Problems After Childhood Cancer: Central Adrenal Insufficiency

Some people who were treated for cancer during childhood may develop endocrine (hormone) problems as a result of changes in the function of a complex system of glands known as the endocrine system.

WHAT IS THE ENDOCRINE SYSTEM?

The endocrine system is a group of glands that regulates many body functions including growth, puberty, energy level, urine production, and stress response. Glands of the endocrine system include the pituitary, hypothalamus, thyroid, adrenals, pancreas, ovaries (in females), and testes (in males). The hypothalamus and pituitary are sometimes called the "master glands" because they control many of the other glands in the endocrine system. Unfortunately, some treatments given for childhood cancer can damage the endocrine system, resulting in a variety of problems.

WHAT ARE HORMONES?

Hormones are chemical messengers that carry information from the endocrine glands through the bloodstream to the body's cells. The endocrine system makes many hormones (such as growth hormone, sex hormones, adrenal and thyroid hormones) that work together to maintain specific bodily functions.

WHAT IS CENTRAL ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY?

Central adrenal insufficiency is caused by a deficiency of the pituitary hormone known as Adrenocorticotropic Hormone (ACTH). The adrenal glands (located on top of the kidneys) are stimulated by ACTH to produce a hormone known as cortisol. If the pituitary gland doesn't make enough ACTH, then cortisol will not be made by the adrenal gland. Cortisol is important for health because it helps to keep the blood sugar at a normal level and helps the body deal with physical stress, such as fevers or injuries.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR CENTRAL ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY?

- Radiation to the brain, especially in higher doses
- Surgical removal of the pituitary gland

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CENTRAL ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY?

Under normal circumstances, there may be no symptoms at all, or there may be mild symptoms, such as fatigue, weakness, poor appetite, or dizziness. However, under stressful circumstances, such as fever, infection, surgery, or injury, symptoms may become severe, and may include vomiting, diarrhea, low blood sugar, and dehydration.

WHAT SCREENING IS RECOMMENDED?

People who had radiation in a dose of 40 Gy (4000 cGy/rads) or higher to the central area of the brain (hypothalamic-pituitary axis) should have a blood test done to check the cortisol level. This test should be done yearly for at least 15 years since this complication can occur many years after radiation. Anyone who is having symptoms suggestive of central adrenal insufficiency should also have a blood test done to check the cortisol level. This test is usually done first thing in the morning, because the cortisol level varies throughout the day and is usually highest early in the morning. If your morning cortisol level is abnormal, your healthcare provider will probably refer you to an endocrinologist (doctor who specializes in hormone problems). The endocrinologist will do more specific tests to evaluate the problem.

HOW IS CENTRAL ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY TREATED?

Central adrenal insufficiency is treated with hydrocortisone, a medication that is given by mouth every day on a regular schedule. In times of increased stress, such as illness or surgery, the dose of hydrocortisone is increased and can be administered by injection if necessary. If you have central adrenal insufficiency, you should wear a medical alert bracelet so that in case of an accident or sudden illness, emergency medical workers will be aware of your special health needs.

Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at www.survivorshipguidelines.org

CureSearch

National Childhood Cancer Foundation
Children's Oncology Group