

Cryptococcosis

Cryptococcosis is an infection caused by a fungus. It can infect the brain, skin, lungs, kidneys, bone marrow, urinary tract and lymph nodes.

It is the most common brain and spinal cord problem linked to HIV. Once a person has this fungus, he or she must stay on meds for life or the problems will come back.

When it causes the inside layer of the brain and the spinal cord to swell, it is called cryptococcal meningitis (CM). This can cause brain damage and other nerve problems.

When this fungus gets into the lungs, it can lead to pneumonia.

People with weak immune systems who get this fungus can quickly go into a coma or die if it is not treated.

Signs

The first signs come on slowly. They can look like the flu. A person with HIV may not be able to tell what is wrong. Signs of CM are:

- Severe headache
- A high fever (over 100°)
- Confusion
- Upset stomach
- Pain from bright light
- Seizures or shakes
- Severe body aches
- Stiff neck
- Throwing up

If a person has a bad headache, feels confused, or has seizures they should see a doctor right away.

Call a doctor if any of these go on for three or more days:

- Fever
- Upset stomach
- Throwing up
- Body aches
- Pain from bright light

CM can affect other organs besides the lungs, brain and spinal cord. It can cause a skin rash that is sometimes the first sign of infection. The spots come in many forms and sometimes look like other skin problems.

Causes and Risk Factors

A fungus found in dirt and in bird poop causes cryptococcosis. Healthy people keep the fungus under control. The risk of this illness is highest when CD4 cell counts are below 100.

How to Know if You Have Cryptococcosis

There are many ways to tell if you have this fungus. A doctor will study samples of blood and spinal fluid. Spinal fluid is taken by a spinal tap.

Treatment

The sooner the fungus is found, the better it can be treated. You can take much less toxic meds.

There are anti-fungal meds given as a pill, a shot, or dripped into a vein. Your doctor may follow up with other meds to fight the infection. Some people may not react well to these meds. Your doctor will decide what is best for your treatment.

CM comes back in about half the people who get it the first time. To make sure it does not come back, special meds that attack fungus must be

taken for life. This applies to all people with CM, even those on HIV treatment.

Prevention

Try not to breathe in dust. Avoid places where birds sleep or poop.

Certain meds can prevent CM. These meds have side effects such as thrush and vaginitis that are hard to treat.

You are less likely to get this disease when you take your HIV meds on time every day.

For more information:

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

