

RUH

Information for Patients

Henoch-Schönlein purpura



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What is Henoch-Schönlein Purpura (HSP)?

Henoch-Schönlein purpura ("hen-awk shern-line purr-purr-ah") causes blood vessels to get inflamed (irritated and swollen). This inflammation is called vasculitis. It usually affects the small blood vessels in the skin (called capillaries). It can also affect blood vessels in the bowel and the kidneys. When the blood vessels get inflamed, they can bleed into the skin, causing a rash that is called purpura. There can also be small amounts of bleeding in the intestines and the kidneys.

What causes HSP?

HSP is caused when a person's immune system doesn't fight an infection like it's supposed to. It occurs most often in the spring, usually after an upper respiratory infection, like a cold. HSP occurs most often in children from 2 to 11 years of age, but it can occur in anyone. Its exact cause is unknown. It might be triggered by bacterial or viral infections, medicines, insect bites, or exposure to chemicals. HSP isn't contagious. Doctors don't know how to prevent HSP yet.

What are the symptoms of HSP?

HSP causes a skin rash, pain in the joints (such as the knees and ankles) and stomach pain. The rash is called Purpura and looks like small bruises or small reddish-purple spots. It's usually on the buttocks, around the elbows and on the legs. HSP can also cause fever, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. The symptoms usually last for about 4 to 6 weeks.

If the blood vessels in the bowel and the kidneys get inflamed, HSP can make you bleed when you have a bowel movement or when you pass urine. Serious kidney problems don't happen very often, but they can occur. In rare cases, an abnormal folding of the bowel called intussusception ("in-tuh-suh-sep-shun") can occur. This makes a blockage in your intestines that may need surgery.

How is HSP treated?

There is no specific treatment for HSP. Fortunately, HSP usually gets better without any treatment. Anti-inflammatory medicines, such as ibuprofen, or pain-killers, such as paracetamol, can help the pain in your joints. Resting will also help. Sometimes medicines like prednisolone can help people with severe stomach pain.

What happens to people with HSP?

Usually, HSP gets better on its own and doesn't cause lasting problems. Some people who have had HSP once will get it again. A few people will have kidney damage because of HSP.

Your doctor will want to test your urine and check your blood pressure regularly for the first few weeks. Once the rash and joint pains have settled, your doctor may want to continue to check urine samples for several months to check for kidney problems. Be sure to see your doctor as many times as he or she tells you to.