About Scleroderma

Scleroderma means hard skin. It is a disease that is both a connective tissue disorder and a rheumatic disease. The skin tightens, thickens, and becomes hard slowly over time losing the ability to stretch. Blood vessels inside the body may also be affected, causing damage to internal organs. This can cause problems with digesting food, breathing and circulation.

Types of Scleroderma

- **Localized**: in a specific area, such as hands, feet and face. It develops slowly and often does not spread.
- **Systemic**: widespread or across multiple areas of the body, including internal organs.

Disease Risk

About 300,000 Americans have scleroderma. The most common age range for systemic scleroderma is 25 to 55.

Women are more likely to develop the disease than men. Greater severity has been reported in persons of Native American or African American descent. Children can develop scleroderma, but it is less common.

Scleroderma can be life threatening, but most people live a normal life span with different degrees of discomfort and disability.
Signs of Scleroderma

The signs of scleroderma vary widely, but may include:

- Cold sensitivity and a bluish or reddish tint in the hands or feet, known as Raynaud’s Syndrome. This is the most common sign at diagnosis.
- Tightening and thickening of the skin.
- Loss of the skin’s ability to stretch.
- Swelling, stiffness, and pain in the fingers, toes, hands, feet or face. It can cause curling of the fingers and toes. Over time loss of function in hands or feet can occur from skin tightening.
- Tingling, numbness, or puffiness in fingers or toes.
- Skin discoloration or small white bumps under the surface of the skin.
- Red spots from dilated blood vessels on the fingers, palms, face, lips or tongue.
- Ulcers or sores on fingertips, knuckles or elbows.
- Brittle bones that may break easily.
- Itching.
- Muscle weakness and fatigue.
- Digestive problems like heartburn, trouble swallowing, or delayed movement of food.
- Shortness of breath from heart or lung damage.

Causes of Scleroderma

The cause of the disease is unknown. As an autoimmune disease, there is a build-up of collagen, one of the building blocks that make skin. Too much collagen causes tissue to become thick and lose flexibility. The immune system responds with inflammation, which makes more collagen.
Treatment

Treatment is done to ease signs and reduce the risk of other problems. Your doctor may use several treatment strategies, including:

- Medicines for skin changes.
- Vasodilator medicines, to relax and open blood vessels.
- Blood pressure medicines, to control blood pressure and to prevent kidney problems.
- Anti-inflammatory and steroid drugs, to decrease joint pain and inflammation.
- Medicine to decrease stomach acid.
- Special diets and medicines, to improve food digestion.
- Stretching.
- Occupational and physical therapy, to keep the joints strong and flexible.

Living with Scleroderma

Take part in your care and you may experience less pain, fewer doctor visits, and a better quality of life. Programs are available to help you understand the disease, and reduce pain while remaining active. Support groups can help you with coping strategies.

The organizations can also provide information and programs:

- American College of Rheumatology at [www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org).

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: [health-info@osu.edu](mailto:health-info@osu.edu).