Guillain Barré Syndrome (GBS)

About GBS

GBS is an autoimmune condition (illness where the body attacks itself) that can cause arm and leg weakness. With GBS, the body reacts by attacking its own nerves. Nerves become swollen and sore and the coating or insulation around the nerve (called the myelin sheath) starts to break down. Without this coating, messages from the brain to the muscles do not get through. When your muscles do not work, they become weak.

Causes of GBS

Doctors do not know what causes GBS, but it often starts when your body is fighting another infection. The body works hard to get rid of the infection and ends up attacking the nerves. Many people, who are sick with GBS, have had a lung or sinus infection or have had diarrhea before signs of GBS start.

Signs of GBS

Muscle weakness is the most common sign of GBS. Weakness often starts in the legs and can occur on one or both sides of the body. Signs may include:

- Pain
- Problems closing your eyes
- Problems speaking or swallowing
- Neck weakness
- Leg weakness or tingling
- Difficulty holding things

If you are having trouble breathing, call your doctor right away.

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Learn more about your health care.
Testing
To find out if you have GBS, your doctor will order certain tests. These tests may include:

- Electromyogram
- Nerve Conduction Tests
- Blood Tests
- Lumbar Puncture
- Nerve Biopsy

Other neurological tests may be given to check your alertness, muscle strength, and your ability to feel in your arms and legs. A respiratory therapist may give you tests to assess the muscles you use to breathe.

Treatment
If the weakness is mild, your condition may get better by itself in 4 to 6 weeks. For others, GBS can be severe with lasting nerve damage. Treatment options may include:

- Medicines.
- Breathing machines, such as ventilator or respirator until muscles used for breathing are stronger.
- Speech, respiratory, occupational or physical therapy exercises to improve strength and function.
- Plasma exchanges. Plasma from your body is removed. Red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets are returned to your body with a fluid replacement. This can reduce the damage to your body from GBS as the plasma exchange takes out the harmful cells that are attacking the nerves.
- Immunoglobulin therapy. Proteins are injected into the body that can help to stop the immune system from attacking the nerves.

It is important to follow your treatment plan. You should actively participate in your recovery, eat a healthy diet and get enough rest.

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.