

What Is Behçet's Disease?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

Behçet's (Beh-CHETS or Beh-SHETS) disease is an illness that causes symptoms in various parts of the body. The more common symptoms include sores in the mouth and on the genitals (sex organs). More serious symptoms can include inflammation (swelling, heat, redness, and pain) in the eyes and other parts of the body.

Who Gets Behçet's Disease?

Behçet's disease is common in some parts of the world, but it is rare in the United States. Although people of all ages can develop the disease, it mainly affects people in their twenties or thirties.

What Causes Behçet's Disease?

Nearly all of the symptoms of Behçet's disease are due to an inflammation of the blood vessels. Doctors aren't sure what causes this inflammation. Some people may have inherited (passed on from parent to child) a problem with the immune system that makes them more likely to develop the disease. For these people, contact with substances in the environment, such as bacteria or viruses, may cause the immune system to attack the blood vessels. Behçet's disease is not contagious; it is not spread from one person to another.

What Are the Symptoms of Behçet's Disease?

The symptoms of Behçet's disease differ from one person to the next. Some people have only mild symptoms, such as sores in the mouth, while others have more severe problems, such as vision loss.

The five most common symptoms of Behçet's disease are:

- Mouth sores
- Genital sores
- Other skin sores
- Swelling of parts of the eye
- Arthritis (pain, swelling, and stiffness in the joints).

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Less common symptoms include:

- Inflammation in the brain and spinal cord
- Blood clots
- Inflammation in the digestive system (the parts of the body that digest food)
- Blindness.

Symptoms may appear, disappear, and then reappear. The times when a person is having symptoms are called flares.

How Is Behçet's Disease Diagnosed?

Behçet's disease is hard to diagnose because:

- The symptoms do not usually appear all at once
- There are other illnesses that have similar symptoms
- There is no single test to diagnose Behçet's disease.

The symptoms that are key to diagnosing Behçet's disease include:

- Mouth sores at least three times in 12 months
- Any two of the following:
 - Genital sores that go away and come back
 - Eye inflammation with loss of vision
 - Sores on the skin
 - Positive skin prick test (the appearance of small red bumps when the skin is pricked with a needle).

Because it may take months or even years for all the common symptoms to appear, the diagnosis may not be made for a long time. Patients can help their doctors to diagnose Behçet's disease by keeping a record of their symptoms and when they occur.

What Kind of Doctor Treats a Patient With Behçet's Disease?

Behçet's disease affects many different parts of the body. In order to treat their symptoms, patients may have to see several kinds of doctors, including:

- Dermatologists (doctors who treat skin disorders)
- Rheumatologists (doctors who treat arthritis and other inflammatory disorders)
- Ophthalmologists (eye doctors)
- Gynecologists (doctors who treat women's sex organs)
- Urologists (doctors who treat bladder conditions and men's sex organs)
- Gastroenterologists (doctors who treat digestive problems)

- Hematologists (doctors who treat blood problems)
- Neurologists (doctors who treat nervous system problems).

It may be helpful to have one doctor to manage treatment and monitor side effects from the medication.

How Is Behçet's Disease Treated?

The goal of treatment is to reduce pain and prevent serious problems. Common treatments include:

- Corticosteroids (medication to reduce pain and inflammation)
- Immunosuppressive drugs (medication that helps control the immune system, reduce inflammation, and prevent disease flares)
- Rest during flares
- Moderate exercise, such as swimming or walking, during periods of remission (a disappearance of symptoms).

Can Behçet's Disease Be Cured?

There is no cure for Behçet's disease, but most people can control symptoms with treatment.

What Research Is Being Done on Behçet's Disease?

Researchers are exploring:

- Improved drug treatments
- The role of certain genes in the development of the disease
- The role of factors in the environment, such as bacteria and the virus that causes cold sores.

For More Information About Behçet's Disease and Other Related Conditions:

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS) Information Clearinghouse

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The information in this fact sheet was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Behçet's Disease Q&A full-text version, please contact NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit www.niams.nih.gov.

For Your Information

This fact sheet may contain information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this fact sheet was printed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at 888-INFO-FDA (toll free: 888-463-6332) or visit its Web site at www.fda.gov.