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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

Introduction

The superior vena cava is a large vein located in the left side of the chest. It returns blood back to the heart after it has made its way through the body. A tumour in the left chest can sometimes push on this vein and partially block the flow of blood back to the heart. This can lead to a collection of symptoms that taken together suggest that the superior vena cava is being obstructed and 'back pressure' is building up in the tissues and organs of the body.

As the tumour grows, the signs and symptoms become more obvious and more of a problem. In the earliest stages of obstruction, mild signs appear first thing in the morning and resolve quickly as the morning unfolds. This is because lying in a flat position overnight may temporarily put more pressure on the vein causing a back-log of blood in the upper body. This build up of pressure is corrected when the person gets up and moves around which results in an increase in the flow of blood past the obstruction, aided in part by gravity and in part by the upright position.

The Signs and Symptoms of Superior Vena Cava Obstruction

The signs and symptoms listed below are due to the blockage of blood flow into the heart. This causes an increasing congestion of blood and an increased blood pressure in the tissues and organs of the body. In the earliest stage of this problem it may be possible to detect some of the following signs and symptoms in the morning:

- A build up of fluid in the whites of both eyes, making the white part of the eyes look saggy. This is a subtle sign that can be difficult to notice.
- Shortness of breath.
- Headache and/or dizziness.
- Fast heart rate.

As the amount of obstruction increases the following signs and symptoms may appear:

- Headaches, dizziness and shortness of breath become more pronounced and are persistent throughout the day.
- The veins in the neck and chest stand out more than usual and become progressively more prominent.
- The face, neck and arms and upper trunk swell up and become red. This becomes progressively more prominent over time and can be noticed because of tightness of the collar and jewellery (such as rings, bracelets and watches).
- Tightness is felt in the throat and can be accompanied by difficulty in swallowing with coughing and loud snoring at night.
- Changes in vision.

Treatment

Superior vena cava obstruction may be overlooked in its early stages (especially when it is developing slowly), and it can be alarming and distressing when it develops quickly. By itself it is seldom fatal and in most cases will respond to treatment. Treatment is focussed on relieving the symptoms by reducing the size

of the tumour and the swelling that accompanies and surrounds the tumour. This is usually done with radiotherapy (and sometimes chemotherapy). Steroid medication can also be used in the first instance to reduce the swelling associated with the tumour until the expected effects of the radiotherapy have been felt.

This type of obstruction is uncommon, but is seen more often in certain sorts of cancer. It may be that the person you are caring for is considered to be at risk of this possible problem and someone in your care team has thought it necessary for you to be aware of the possibility of superior vena cava obstruction. If this is the case, members of the care team will be on the lookout for this problem and will be quick to act should it arise. You will not be expected to diagnose it by yourself.

Disclaimer

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This information should be read in conjunction with the advice provided by your palliative care team.