

Introduction

Syringomyelia, also called a syrinx, happens when fluid filled cavities form within the spinal cord. These are known as cysts. Syringomyelia can cause pain, weakness and stiffness in the back. Without treatment, it can lead to more serious disorders.

This reference summary explains syringomyelia. It talks about the symptoms and causes of the disorder. It also covers how syringomyelia is diagnosed and treated.

Anatomy

The spinal cord is the main connection between the brain and the rest of the body. The spinal cord also allows the brain to send orders and messages to the muscles of the body. These messages let us breathe, move, feel and walk. A liquid called cerebrospinal fluid surrounds the spinal cord. It is also known as CSF. It transports nutrients and waste products. CSF also protects the spinal cord. Sometimes too much cerebrospinal fluid can build up within the spinal cord. This causes a cyst. This is called syringomyelia, or a syrinx.

Symptoms

Symptoms of syringomyelia often happen slowly. But if the condition is caused by a fall or other trauma, symptoms may happen quickly.

Symptoms of syringomyelia include:

- Loss of sensation of hot and cold.
- Muscle weakness.
- Numbness or tingling.
- Pain in the arms, legs, neck or back.
- Stiffness.



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Syringomyelia can also cause:

- Problems with bowel control.
- Numbness or pain in the face.
- Headaches.

Syringomyelia can cause problems with reflexes and movement. It can make it hard to do normal activities like walking. Untreated syringomyelia can lead to a condition called scoliosis. Scoliosis is an abnormal curve of the spine. This can lead to back pain and breathing problems.

Syringomyelia can also cause Horner syndrome. Horner syndrome is a disorder that affects some of the nerves that go to the face. It can cause drooping eyelids. It can also cause a loss of the ability to sweat normally. If you have symptoms of syringomyelia, contact your health care provider.



Causes

Syringomyelia, or a syrinx, happens when cysts form in the spinal cord. These cysts form when too much CSF builds up within the spinal cord. The cause of these cysts is not always known. It is usually the result of another condition.

Syringomyelia can be caused by Chiari malformation. Chiari malformation is a condition that can cause the lower part of the brain to put pressure on the spinal cord. It can cause severe arm and leg weakness, decreased sensation and bladder problems. Syringomyelia can also be caused by meningitis. Meningitis is a condition that causes inflammation around the brain and spinal cord.

The disorder can also be caused by an injury or spinal cord scarring. Injuries can happen when someone falls or gets into a car accident. Scarring can happen because of surgery. Tethered spinal cord syndrome is a condition that causes the bottom part of the spinal cord to attach to some of the surrounding tissues. This can cause CSF to build up and cause syringomyelia.



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Tumors in or on the spinal cord can cause CSF to build up in certain areas. This can lead to syringomyelia.

Diagnosis

Your health care provider will ask you about your medical history. He or she will perform a physical exam. Syringomyelia is often diagnosed with an MRI or CT scan. An MRI scan uses powerful magnets linked to a computer to make pictures of the inside of your body. A CT scan creates pictures of the inside of your body using a computer linked to an x-ray machine.



Treatment

Treatment for syringomyelia depends on the condition that causes the disorder. If it causes symptoms, syringomyelia is usually treated with surgery. If syringomyelia is not causing symptoms, treatment may not be needed.

Surgery that creates more space at the base of the skull may be done to treat Chiari malformation. This can reduce pressure on the spinal cord. It makes cysts smaller.

Cysts can be drained with a shunt. A shunt is a tube placed during surgery that drains extra fluid from inside the cyst. If syringomyelia is caused by a tethered spinal cord, an operation to relieve the tethering may help.

Mild cases may be managed without surgery. Avoiding contact sports and not straining during bowel movements can help decrease symptoms. These activities can cause more CSF to be pushed into the cyst. Talk to your health care provider about managing your activities to help with syringomyelia symptoms.



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Summary

Syringomyelia is a disorder that causes cysts to form in the spinal cord. Cysts are abnormal pockets of tissue that form in the body.

Symptoms of syringomyelia include:

- Loss of sensation of hot and cold.
- Muscle weakness.
- Numbness or tingling.
- Pain in the arms, legs, neck or back.
- Stiffness.

Syringomyelia can also cause:

- Problems with bowel control.
- Numbness or pain in the face.
- Headaches.



Cysts can form when too much cerebrospinal fluid, or CSF, builds up within the spinal cord. The cause of these cysts is not always known. It is usually the result of another condition.

Treatment for syringomyelia depends on the condition that causes the disorder. When symptomatic, it is usually treated with surgery. If syringomyelia is not causing symptoms, treatment may not be needed.

If your health care provider does not recommend surgery, you can manage the disorder by avoiding certain activities that may make symptoms worse. Physical therapy may help with your symptoms. Your health care provider may be able to recommend a treatment plan to help with any pain you may have.

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