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Pericarditis

Definition

Pericarditis is a condition in which the sac-like covering around the heart (pericardium) becomes inflamed.

See also: Bacterial pericarditis

Causes

Pericarditis is usually a complication of viral infections, most commonly echovirus or coxsackie virus. Less frequently, it is caused by influenza or HIV infection.

Infections with bacteria can lead to bacterial pericarditis (also called purulent pericarditis). Some fungal infections can also produce pericarditis.

In addition, pericarditis can be associated with diseases such as:

Autoimmune disorders

Cancer (including leukemia)

HIV infection and AIDS

Hypothyroidism

Kidney failure

Rheumatic fever

Tuberculosis

Other causes include:

Heart attack (see post-MI pericarditis)

Injury (including surgery) or trauma to the chest, esophagus, or heart

Medications that suppress the immune system

Myocarditis

Radiation therapy to the chest

Often the cause of pericarditis remains unknown. In this case, the condition is called idiopathic pericarditis.

Pericarditis most often affects men aged 20 - 50. It usually follows respiratory infections. In children, it is most commonly caused by adenovirus or coxsackie virus.

Symptoms

Ankle, feet, and leg swelling (occasionally)

Anxiety

Breathing difficulty when lying down

Chest pain, caused by the inflamed pericardium rubbing against the heart

May radiate to the neck, shoulder, back, or abdomen

Often increases with deep breathing and lying flat, and may increase with coughing and swallowing

Pleuritis type: a sharp, stabbing pain

Usually relieved by sitting up and leaning forward

Dry cough

Fatigue

Fever

Need to bend over or hold the chest while breathing

Exams and Tests

When listening to the heart with a stethoscope, the health care provider can hear a sound called a pericardial rub. The heart sounds may be muffled or distant. There may be other signs of fluid in the pericardium (pericardial effusion).

If the disorder is severe, there may be:

Crackles in the lungs

Decreased breath sounds

Other signs of fluid in the space around the lungs (pleural effusion)

If fluid has built up in the pericardial sac, it may show on:

Chest MRI scan

Chest x-ray

ECG

Echocardiogram

Heart MRI or heart CT scan

Radionuclide scanning

These tests show:

Enlargement of the heart

Signs of inflammation

Scarring and contracture of the pericardium (constrictive pericarditis)

Other findings vary depending on the cause of pericarditis.

To rule out heart attack, the health care provider may order serial cardiac marker levels (CPK-MB and troponin I). Other laboratory tests may include:

Blood culture

CBC

C-reactive protein

Erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR)

HIV serology

Pericardiocentesis, with chemical analysis and pericardial fluid culture

Tuberculin skin test

Treatment

The cause of pericarditis must be identified, if possible.

Medications include:

Analgesics for pain

Antibiotics for bacterial pericarditis

Antifungal medications for fungal pericarditis

Aspirin or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) such as ibuprofen for inflammation of the pericardium

Corticosteroids such as prednisone (in some patients)

Colchicine

If the buildup of fluid in the pericardium makes the heart function poorly or produces cardiac tamponade, it is necessary to drain the fluid from the sac. This procedure, called pericardiocentesis, may be done using an echocardiography-guided needle or minor surgery.

If the pericarditis is chronic, recurrent, or causes constrictive pericarditis, cutting or removing part of the pericardium may be recommended.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Pericarditis can range from mild cases that get better on their own to life-threatening cases. The condition can be complicated by significant fluid buildup around the heart and poor heart function.

The outcome is good if the disorder is treated promptly. Most people recover in 2 weeks to 3 months. However, pericarditis may come back.

Possible Complications

Arrhythmias

Cardiac tamponade

Constrictive pericarditis, which may develop into heart failure

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider if you experience the symptoms of pericarditis. This disorder can be life threatening if untreated.

Prevention

Many cases are not preventable.

References

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