

Pulmonary Hypertension Can be life threatening

Pulmonary hypertension (PH) is the \$25 name (because in medicine we can't give anything a simple name) for a complex health problem. This problem is, simply stated, high blood pressure of the lungs.

PH is a rare, but life threatening disease that affects the blood vessels of the lungs by making them contract. The narrowing of the blood vessels reduces the flow of blood to the lungs and forces the heart to work harder to pump blood through these narrow vessels.

When less blood flows to the lungs, less oxygen is picked up. People with PH generally suffer from a progressive shortness of breath and fatigue. Eventually, if it is left untreated, pumping against the high pressure in the lungs will cause the right side of the heart to fail.

PH is NOT contagious! In the U.S. approximately 800 people are diagnosed with some form of PH every year. Now, considering all the other diseases out there this is not a big number. But let me assure that we have people in this area with pulmonary hypertension.

Although anyone can get it, PH is predominantly seen in young females between the years of 21 and 40. This is a non-discriminatory disease. It doesn't matter what race you are, and males also get it.

Unfortunately for most of its victims, PH is not recognized until the disease is quite advanced. The reason for this is because its early symptoms are often confused with those of many other conditions. Some symptoms are:

- Breathlessness or shortness of breath
- Feeling tired all the time
- Dizziness, after climbing stairs or standing up
- Fainting
- Swollen ankles or legs
- Chest pain, usually during physical activity

When PH is suspected, some of the tests to confirm the diagnosis may include:

- Echocardiogram
- Electrocardiogram
- Right heart catheterization
- Six-minute walk test
- Pulmonary functions test
- CT scan

Pulmonary hypertension is a chronic condition. It's life threatening and at this time there is no cure. There are treatments and medications available, however. The type of treatment and/or medications patients receive will vary depending on the specific problems caused by the disease. If medications don't work, the only current therapy that remains is a lung transplant.

This is an impressive little disease, as diseases go. Those who are currently being treated for it can humble you with their knowledge. They are strong and determined individuals.

There is help and support out there. If you do have questions or concerns, the southern Colorado PH Group can be reached at 719-372-3305. There is hope on the horizon. With every passing day new therapies and treatments are being tested and developed.