Pulmonary Fibrosis

What is pulmonary fibrosis?

With pulmonary fibrosis there is scar tissue in the lungs. This damages the alveoli. Alveoli are tiny sacs that take oxygen into the lungs and get rid of carbon dioxide. The scarring also damages other lungs tissues.

This problem may be mild but often slowly gets worse. It is not cancer and it is not contagious.

What causes pulmonary fibrosis?

There are over 140 known causes of this disease. In most cases, the cause is not known and this is called pulmonary fibrosis.

Working with things like asbestos, ground stone, metal dust, grain or moldy hay can cause this disease. When the tiny particles are inhaled, the lungs are damaged and the scar tissue forms.

Tobacco smoke also increases a person's chance of developing pulmonary fibrosis.

Diseases like sarcoidosis, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and sclerosis, sometimes cause pulmonary fibrosis.

Doctors also think that when something hurts the lungs such as infection you may have inflammation that leads to fibrosis.

Who gets pulmonary fibrosis?

People of any age who work in the types of jobs, or who have the diseases listed above may develop this condition. Patients with pulmonary fibrosis are usually middle-aged. Where you live, your gender, your race or ethnicity, do not seem to make a difference.

What are the symptoms?

The first sign is almost always shortness of breath. It often starts when the person is exercising. As the disease goes on the person may also be breathless when resting. A dry cough is common. The fingertips may also swell. This is called clubbing.

How is this disease diagnosed?

First, a chest X-ray is done. If this is not normal, a CT scan of the chest will be done. Breathing tests are also important. These show how severe the problem is. A sample of lung tissue may be taken for testing. This is called a biopsy. The sample may be taken by bronchoscopy or surgery.

What is the treatment?

If you know what substance is causing the problem, you will need to avoid it. Your doctor will try to stop the inflammation in the lungs before scar tissue forms.

Your doctor may have you take a corticosteroid medication. When you are taking this medication, you need to see your doctor often to see if it is working and to check for side effects.

Rehabilitation and educational programs help teach you how to breathe more easily, control fatigue and stay as healthy as you can.

When the disease is severe, extra oxygen may be needed.

When all treatment fails, younger people may be able to have a lung transplant.

What happens to most people?

Scarring is slow over many years. Medications sometimes help but often do not. You will need to be followed by your doctor closely to try to live the best you can.