



MULTI-SYSTEM DISEASE

Today's Most Common Cause of Severe, Chronic Pain

Today, a single labeled disease is usually given to a person as the cause of their severe chronic or intractable pain. These common labels include complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS), adhesive arachnoiditis, pudendal neuropathy, traumatic brain injury, small fiber neuropathy, and osteoarthritis. The singular diagnosis given in medical practice is usually the more prominent cause of pain. Also, a singular diagnosis is required for record keeping, financial considerations, justification for medicinals and diagnostic testing. An emerging fact is, however, that the person who has severe chronic pain and requires daily symptomatic relief almost always has pain in more than one body system or anatomic site. For example, a recent study by us found that persons with adhesive arachnoiditis have an average of three to four other painful conditions. This reality is best called by an older medical term, “multi-system disease.”

Definition and History: A multi-system disease is one that has a single cause that affects multiple body systems. Historically an infectious agent has been the cause of multi-system disease. The best known are syphilis and tuberculosis. The former originates in sex organs and the latter in the lung, but both infections can travel through the blood, infect, and form disease in multiple other body systems such as the brain, spinal cord, and adrenal gland. In the late 20th century diabetes and autoimmune diseases such as systemic lupus became known as causes that may affect multiple body systems. In this century, it has been discovered that genetic connective tissue diseases such as Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, the bacteria, Lyme, and some viruses, especially Epstein-Barr may affect multiple body systems and produce chronic pain.

Origination of Pain: Some severe chronic pain patients develop their pain as a result of trauma or injury to one of the body systems listed in the Table. The pain may remain localized to this one system. The majority of persons in pain treatment, today, however, began with pain in one body system and then subsequently develop pain in other anatomic locations or body systems. For example, a typical person in pain treatment today may complain of pain in the spine, muscle, joints, and nerves. (See Table)

Critical Need to Identify Multi-System Disease: The genetic, infectious, and autoimmune causes of multi-system disease appear to all be progressive with a proclivity to affect, over time, additional tissues and systems. Our view is that the progressive nature of multi-system disease may not just cause intractable, disabling pain but impairment of physical and mental functions that severely incapacitate an individual. Suicide or a shortened lifespan may be involved in severe cases.

BODY SYSTEMS

Cardiovascular
Cerebral/brain
Connective tissue
Dental
Gastrointestinal
Hearing
Joint
Muscular
Nasopharyngeal
Neurologic
Pulmonary
Renal/urinary
Sexual
Skeletal
Spinal cord/canal
Spine
Visual

Major Take Home Message: Modern day pain treatment is fundamentally for symptomatic relief. This includes opioids, neuropathic agents, anti-inflammatory drugs, and electromedical measures. This document is a clarion call to recognize multi-system diseases, determine its underlying cause, and simultaneously treat it and the pain generated by the disease.