

MANAGING YOUR KAPOSI SARCOMA

What Is Kaposi Sarcoma?

Kaposi sarcoma (KS) is a rare cancer thought to start in tissue lining blood or lymph vessels under the skin or in mucous membranes (as in the mouth). Four types have been described: epidemic, immunosuppression-related, classic, and African. Epidemic KS is associated with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Immunosuppression-related KS is usually found in people with kidney transplants. In transplantation, strong drugs are used to suppress the immune system and prevent it from rejecting the kidney. This type of KS can be slow and inactive or aggressive.

Classic KS is more common in Jewish and Mediterranean men. Most survive more than 10 years and die of some other condition. African KS is typically found among young black men in Africa.

What Causes Kaposi Sarcoma?

The cause is thought to be a herpesvirus (HHV-8). The virus can be passed to others sexually and through nonsexual contact such as mothers to babies (common in African countries).

What Are the Symptoms of Kaposi Sarcoma?

The usual symptom is a rash (lesion) of small reddish-purple spots, commonly seen on the lower legs. KS can also be found on the nose and rest of the face. It can spread into lymph glands (nodes), stomach, and lungs. If it's in the stomach, bleeding or abdominal pain can occur. If it's in the lungs, shortness of breath occurs.

How Is Kaposi Sarcoma Diagnosed?

The health care provider may suspect KS from the medical history and physical examination, but the only sure way to diagnose it is by doing a biopsy. In a biopsy the doctor takes a small piece of tissue to check with a microscope. Blood tests may be done to rule out HIV infection.

How Is Kaposi Sarcoma Treated?

Treatment depends on how severe the disease is and how far it spread. Watching (monitoring without treatment), supportive therapy, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy may be used. The decision to undergo treatment must be made with a specialist who has experience with KS.

Inactive forms of the classic, African, and immunosuppressive types of KS need only observation and follow-up visits to watch for symptoms or for surgery to fix skin problems.

Radiation therapy is effective for single lesions that cause symptoms. Complications of radiation therapy include dry, red, itchy skin.

Chemotherapy can be given directly into the lesion when treating a single lesion or intravenously for multiple lesions, or advanced disease. Side effects of chemotherapy are nausea, vomiting, hair loss, easy bruising and bleeding, and infections.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Kaposi Sarcoma

- ✓ **DO** get an expert's opinion.
- ✓ **DO** remember that there are types of KS and that the way the disease acts changes for each type.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you find a discolored lesion on your face, nose, or legs. Call if you're in pain, have shortness of breath, vomit blood, or have swollen lymph glands. Call if a skin lesion breaks down.

✓ **DO** practice safe sex!

⊗ **DON'T** forget that among homosexuals, KS is thought to be transmitted through anal

sex.

⊗ **DON'T** think that if you're not homosexual, you won't get KS. Women can get KS after having sex with bisexual men.

⊗ **DON'T** use illicit drugs. Intravenous drug abusers are at higher risk to get KS.

FROM THE DESK OF

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- National Cancer Institute (NCI): Tel: (800) 800-4-CANCER
- American Cancer Society: Tel: (800) ACS-2345

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