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THE TIMES OF INDIA

## You may be sitting on a lung disease 'time bomb'!

TNN | Apr 29, 2016, 10.31 PM IST



*You may be sitting on a lung disease 'time bomb' (Getty Images)*

Lungs pump oxygen in your bloodstream, helping all your organs function normally. And when they take a hit, it can get pretty serious. Considered one of the most critical issues concerning lungs, Interstitial Lung Disease (ILD) can play havoc with some very vital functions of your body.

Let's understand the function of the lungs first. For the uninitiated, there is a lace-like network called interstitium that extends through both the lungs. It primarily supports the microscopic air sacs called alveoli. There are tiny blood vessels that run through the interstitium, which aid pumping oxygen into the bloodstream. Through alveoli, oxygen travels to the body through capillaries. ILD makes the capillary membrane thick and fibrosed and reduces the transfer of oxygen from alveoli and capillaries.

Interstitial lung disease (ILD) is a chronic condition that can be classified into group of diseases that damage the lung. It is also known as pulmonary fibrosis. Psychosensitivity pneumonitis, Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis, Connective Tissue Disease associated ILD and Sarcoidosis are some of the common ILDs. ILDs scar the lung tissues, making them lose their ability to transfer oxygen to the bloodstream. Thus, affecting brain and other organs from functionally normally. This makes it more difficult to breathe. Once the lung is scarred, it is generally irreversible.

Common symptoms are dry cough and breathlessness on walking or running or climbing staircases. Usually the symptoms continue for many months and progress slowly.

Why is it difficult to diagnose?

Dr. Salil Bendre, Head of Dept. Pulmonary Medicine, Nanavati Super Speciality Hospital, Vile Parle, Mumbai explains, "ILD presents with vague symptoms of dry cough initially. For this, the patient usually ignores the symptoms or takes symptomatic treatment. Gradually the patient develops breathlessness. Many times, this is confused with chronic obstructive lung disease (COPD) or related to allergy. Since the patient approaches the doctor late, it is already progressed by the time it is diagnosed. Doctors miss the diagnosis because many times viral infections/pollution related lung diseases present with similar complaints."

Dr Prashant Chhajed, Pulmonologist, Fortis Hospital Vashi warns, "Important medications and studies have come forth in the past 5 years, but it is not so simple to label a patient as someone suffering from ILD. There are sub-types and the treatment varies depending on the sub-type. It is very important to assess the right sub-type and the treatment is tailor-made on that basis. It is also important to make the family aware of the course the disease can take." Some ILD can progress very rapidly, some grumble along way, but they are progressive disease.

Besides X-ray chest, CT scan of the chest, there are some lung function tests that can help investigate the problem. There is another test called the 6-minute walk test. The patient is made to walk for 6 minutes and it is observed how much the oxygen drops in that time.

Pigeon droppings are extremely dangerous

Talking about the causes, ILD can be broadly categorized into both known and unknown causes. The ones known include autoimmune diseases, occupational or organic exposures, medications, and radiation.

Psychosensitivity pneumonitis predominantly occurs due to pigeon droppings, especially in cities like Mumbai. Pigeon droppings get carried in the air you breathe and once inhaled, some can have a very serious reactions, causing injury to the lungs.

While some are sensitive to pigeon droppings, others can be hypersensitive to fumes and paints or fungus in the house.

"I suggest all my patients to ensure they don't have pigeons breeding around their house and discourage them from feeding them. It's better to be safe than sorry," adds Dr Chhajed.