Facial Wasting (Lipoatrophy)

Facial wasting – lipoatrophy – is the loss of fat under the skin. It makes the face look thin. It makes wrinkles or folds in the skin more noticeable. HIV itself or the medications used to treat it can cause it. Facial wasting is a sign of AIDS.

Fat is important for your health. It makes chemicals the immune and digestive systems need.

Symptoms of Facial Wasting

Without fat under the skin, people look older, tired or unwell. The eyes, cheeks and forehead look sunken.

Wasting in the face can make a person:
- Less self-confident
- Unwilling to be social
- Less interested in sex
- Less willing to stick with treatment
- Depressed

Causes of Facial Wasting

Lipoatrophy can be caused by some anti-HIV prescription drugs including Zerit® (stavudine, d4T), Retrovir® (zidovudine, AZT) and Videx® (didanosine, ddI). It is caused when fat cells are damaged because they no longer are able to make a chemical that the cells need to work properly. Other causes include: HIV itself, age and genetics.

Risk Factors for Facial Wasting

Four things may increase wasting:
- Using a class of anti-HIV prescription drugs called nucleoside analogs
- Being older than 40
- Having a high triglyceride level
- Having a low CD4 count when starting anti-HIV medication

Diagnosing Facial Wasting

It is important to note that the symptoms of lipoatrophy and wasting are different.

Lipoatrophy is a loss of fat under the skin.
Wasting is the loss of both fat and muscle.

Wasting usually follows 30 days or more of diarrhea, weakness and/or fever. It is the unintended loss of more than 10% of a person’s body weight.

Treating Facial Wasting

Currently, it is not possible to restore the fat. Changing anti-HIV medication can slow down the process.

Some things can be done to replace the fat. For example, Sculptra® causes scar tissue and fat to collect where it has been injected. Shots are given every two weeks for about three to six times. There may be some pain but it is not severe. Other side effects may also include: tenderness, swelling and bruising. Sometimes small lumps happen after treatment. They usually can be felt but not seen. Results will vary.

The depression, avoiding social events, not having a sense of well-being can be caused by low testosterone. People with signs of facial wasting should also be checked for low testosterone to see how this can be treated.

For more information:
Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare’s nurse advice line at: (800) 832-0778.