Lactic Acidosis

Lactic acidosis is a life threatening condition. It happens when lactate builds up in the blood.

Lactate is a waste that is made when the body’s cells create energy. The muscles make lactic acid and lactate during exercise and this is what makes muscles sore after a workout.

The liver breaks down lactate. When there is too much lactate in the body, the liver can not keep up and the extra lactate builds up in the blood.

People who are taking the class of anti-HIV prescription drugs called nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs) have mild increases in lactic acid. Lactic acidosis is a serious, but rare, side effect.

Symptoms of Lactic Acidosis

Common signs of lactic acidosis include:

- Abnormal heart beat
- Cold or blue hands and feet
- Feeling very tired most of the time
- High lactic acid levels in the blood
- Inflammation of the pancreas
- Nausea, vomiting and stomach pain
- Severe weakness in the limbs
- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing
- Tenderness on the right side under the rib cage. This may be a sign of an enlarged liver.
- Tingling and pain in the fingers and toes
- Weight loss

Causes of and Risk Factors for Lactic Acidosis

Lactic acidosis is caused by damage to the parts of the cells that make energy.

The condition has been linked to taking prescription drugs including: Epivir® (lamivudine or 3TC), Retrovir® (zidovudine, AZT), Ziagen® (abacavir), Zerit® (stravudine, d4T), Hivid® (ddC) and Videx® (didanosine, ddl).

It can also happen if the liver can not clear the lactate out of the blood. NRTIs cause the liver to store fat, which does not allow the liver to break down the lactate properly.

The risk of getting lactic acidosis is greater if you are:

- Taking Zerit® (stravudine) and Videx® (didanosine)
- Overweight
- A woman
- In the advanced stages HIV and not getting enough food
- Taking Rebetol® (ribavirin) for hepatitis C

Preventing Lactic Acidosis

There are no tests to see who is at risk of this condition.

A person on NRTIs should stay alert for signs of lactic acidosis. If they occur, you should see a doctor right away.

Diagnosing Lactic Acidosis

If there are signs of lactic acidosis, a doctor may perform blood tests. To check for an enlarged liver, a computed tomography (CT) scan or ultrasound of the liver may be ordered.
Treating Lactic Acidosis

Treatment depends on how serious the condition is. A person with mildly high lactate levels may not have to make any changes.

In very serious cases, it may be necessary to stop taking NRTIs. This should never be done without talking to a doctor.

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