How Psoriasis May Increase Your Risk of Heart Disease

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The Connection Between Psoriasis and Heart Disease

The American Heart Association insists that inflammation is at the center of cardiovascular disease: certain genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors can injure and inflame the heart and blood vessels, causing a build-up of plaque in the arteries (atherosclerosis), which will increase your chance of heart attack and stroke.

Since psoriasis (and all its myriad symptoms) stems from an inflammatory response of the immune system, many experts believe that this inflammation can raise the risk of serious heart problems in patients.

How Psoriasis Affects Heart Disease Risk

Whether or not inflammation is to blame for cardiovascular problems, researchers have uncovered an undeniable link between psoriasis and heart disease.

A landmark study out of Copenhagen tracked the general population of Denmark for nearly a decade (from 1997 to 2006) to uncover the relationship between psoriasis, heart attack, and stroke. At the end of the study, psoriasis sufferers were found to be:

- 21 percent more likely to have a heart attack.
- 54 percent more likely to suffer a stroke.
- 53 percent more likely to die over a ten-year period.
- More likely to need heart procedures like angioplasty.

One important point about statistics is that they are averages – not every psoriasis patient will have precisely the same risk for developing a heart condition. For instance, researchers found that younger psoriasis sufferers (those under the age of 60) were the most likely to suffer from cardiovascular issues down the road, while the patients with mild psoriasis may actually be at a higher risk of stroke than other patients.

Although the autoimmune disease itself seems to have a strong impact on your cardiovascular health, other genetic and lifestyle components contribute to your risk of heart disease, as well. This means that, while you can’t control all of your risk factors, you can certainly minimize some of them.

The Link Between Obesity, Psoriasis and Heart Disease

The effect of obesity on heart health is well-documented: carrying too much extra weight puts a dangerous strain on the heart, arteries, and your entire circulatory system. The link between psoriasis and obesity is not as widely known, but just as important. In fact, psoriasis patients are more likely to be obese than those without the skin disorder, although it’s unclear whether obesity causes psoriasis outbreaks, or psoriasis (and the lifestyle limitations that it brings) lead to obesity.

What does this mean for psoriasis and weight management? Well, experts can certainly agree on one fact: losing weight can ease psoriasis symptoms, sometimes significantly, and maintaining a healthy weight should play a central role in any psoriasis management plan. Since obesity also directly contributes to cardiovascular damage, getting your weight under control can be a huge step to lowering your heart disease risk when you live with psoriasis.

Steps to Better Heart Health With Psoriasis

Weight control is crucial, but it isn't the only way to improve your cardiovascular outlook. With some general changes, and a few specific modifications, you may be able to reduce or avoid clogged arteries and protect your heart for years to come.

Reduce Stress Right Away

Stress can be a triple threat to your heart health: it inflames psoriasis symptoms, releases hormones that encourage fat storage, and can change the way your blood clots (which may lead to a heart attack or stroke). In turn, your stress management is the first area to make changes for better skin and heart health.

Releasing mental and physical tension can be as easy as exercising more often, or taking a couple of meditative breaks in the day. Yoga and meditation classes are useful, but you can practice simple visualization exercises and progressive muscle relaxation techniques in your own home, too.

If you struggle with an anxiety disorder, you're not alone – psoriasis, like other arthritic and inflammatory conditions, increases your chances of developing depression or severe anxiety. In these cases, you may need a multi-pronged attack to beat the stress, including regular meetings with a therapist, peer support group, or even a career change.

Improve Your Diet

Some psoriasis patients report dietary triggers, but even if you're not prone to food intolerances, adapting your diet to suit your skin can be a very good idea. Anti-inflammatory foods should take center stage, which can boost heart health as they work to scale back your psoriasis flares:

- **Add more omega-3 fatty acids**. These important compounds have been found to reduce inflammation, but you have to take in a fairly high amount to reap the rewards. This means you should incorporate fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, and sardines in several meals each week (and you can add some flax seed to push the omega-3 count even higher). If this simply isn't possible, consider fish oil supplements: a high-grade fish oil may decrease inflammation rather significantly.
- **Reduce omega-6 fatty acids.** Some omega-6 fatty acid is good for the body, but too much can lead to more inflammation, and cancel out the healthy properties of omega-3 fatty acids. The major problem foods are vegetable oils, especially sunflower and soybean oils. Studies show that Americans now get almost 20 percent of their daily calories from soybean oil (it's prevalent in many processed and prepackages foods), and doctors suspect that this sort of diet is leading to the rising incidence of all inflammatory disease, including heart disease and psoriasis.
- **Replace sugar with fiber**. Refined grains and sugary products trigger an inflammatory response, plus they have virtually no fiber. Fiber can reduce levels of C-reactive protein, a prominent marker of inflammation in the blood, and the best sources are from whole grains and vegetables. But you should try to enjoy these fibrous foods as close to their natural form as possible, since processing can reduce their nutritional composition and may even add in more sugar.

There are lots of little ways to improve your heart and skin health, and that means you should focus on a diverse approach to self-care. Changing your diet or fighting stress are both helpful approaches, but combine them and you'll get a much greater effect.

Speak with your doctor about any dangers or concerns related to psoriasis and heart disease risk, and begin to

move forward with a heart-healthy lifestyle built around sustainable changes in your routine.