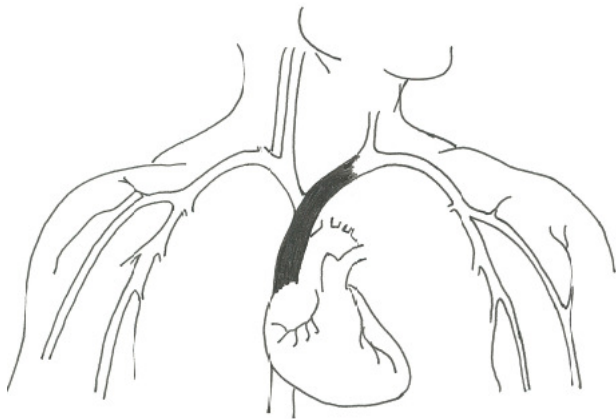


Superior Vena Cava Obstruction

Fact sheet

The Superior Vena Cava (SVC) is the major vein which returns blood to the heart from the upper body and head.

Superior Vena Cava obstruction is caused by a blockage to the flow of blood either by compression of the vein, or a blood clot forming inside the vein.



The most common causes of compression of the SVC are cancer of the lung, particularly small cell lung cancer, and cancers which have spread to lymph nodes in the space between the lungs (mediastinum) such as Non Hodgkins Lymphoma and breast cancer.

Sometimes a blood clot forms as a result of having a piece of medical equipment in the vein: an intravenous central line in place for chemotherapy (a 'port') or dialysis; or a pacemaker lead.

Signs and symptoms can develop rapidly over a few days, or more slowly over a few weeks.

Signs and Symptoms

If you and your doctor think you are at risk of Superior Vena Cava Obstruction it is extremely important that any of the following signs and symptoms are reported and investigated.

Symptoms are often worse first thing in the morning and improve as the day goes on. They include:

- swollen and flushed or dusky face and neck;
- a feeling of pressure in the head and neck;
- headaches, which worsen on leaning forward or bending over;
- dizziness;
- swollen arms and hands;
- visible swollen blue veins on the chest;
- changes to vision;
- breathlessness, due to swelling around the windpipe (trachea);
- cough; or
- hoarse voice.

These symptoms can be quite frightening, but will respond quickly to management and treatment, therefore early diagnosis is essential.

Diagnosis

Superior Vena Cava Obstruction is diagnosed by thorough medical examination, and confirmed by a chest X-Ray and/or CT scan.

Management

Management is aimed firstly at reducing swelling and relieving the feelings of fear and anxiety which accompany the symptoms, until treatment can be started.

- Sitting upright or raising the head of the bed;
- High dose steroid medication to reduce inflammation and swelling around the vein(SVC) and the windpipe;
- Medication to reduce anxiety: a combination of low dose morphine and benzodiazepines (valium-like medicine); and
- Oxygen for breathlessness if needed.

Treatment

Treatment is aimed at shrinking the mass which is compressing the vein, or removing the clot which is blocking it.

If the cause is a cancer, the doctors might need to take a biopsy of the mass to identify the exact type so that they can prescribe the most effective treatment. This may be:

- Radiotherapy to shrink cancers if they haven't been treated this way before, and if they are not sensitive to chemotherapy.
- Chemotherapy to shrink cancers which are known to be sensitive to it such as lymphomas and small cell lung cancer.
- If the cancer mass has previously had maximum radiotherapy or is not sensitive to chemotherapy, a small tube called a stent can be inserted into the vein to support the walls of the vein and allow the blood to flow freely.

- If an intravenous central line is place - to remove it to reduce irritation of the blood vessel and prevent further clotting.
- Anticoagulant (blood thinning) medication to shrink the clot and prevent further clotting.
- Removal of the clot using special surgical techniques.

If the person is not fit enough to have the treatments or procedures, the symptoms can be managed to ensure comfort.

Related Fact Sheets:

Emergencies in Palliative Care

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