
Kawasaki Disease Factsheet

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Kawasaki disease is a form of Vasculitis that may involve small to medium sized blood vessels throughout the body. It generally affects children under 5 years. Most children get completely better and do not develop complications. Kawasaki disease is usually treated with aspirin medicine and immunoglobulin given by a drip into a vein.

Who gets Kawasaki disease?

Kawasaki disease affects children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years, primarily of Asian origin. It is commonest in Japan but is also seen in many other parts of the world. In the UK it affects about 8 children in 100,000. It is slightly more common in boys than girls. Rarely, it has been seen in teenagers and adults.

What causes Kawasaki disease?

The cause is unknown. The most widely accepted theory is that infection with a germ (a virus or bacteria) sets off an overactivity of the immune system in people who are born with a genetic tendency to develop the disease. The immune system attacks the small and medium sized blood vessels of the body, causing inflammation (vasculitis).

What are the symptoms of Kawasaki disease?

Your child may develop:

- A fever lasting more than 5 days.
- A skin rash.
- Swollen dry cracked lips or a red swollen tongue.
- Bloodshot eyes.
- Swollen lymph nodes ("glands") in the neck.
- Swelling and redness of the hands and feet. Occasionally the skin may start to peel, particularly around the fingers and toes.
- Other symptoms your child may get include diarrhoea, vomiting, pain passing urine due to an inflamed urethra (urine pipe), stomach pains or joint pains.

How is Kawasaki disease diagnosed?

There are no special tests that can diagnose Kawasaki disease. The doctor may suggest that your child has some blood tests to help confirm the diagnosis and rule out other causes. Heart tests may also be suggested to make sure your child is not developing complications.

What is the treatment for Kawasaki disease?

Children with Kawasaki disease are usually admitted to hospital because they become unwell quite quickly. Your child may be given immunoglobulins (infection-fighting proteins produced by the immune system) through a vein and aspirin to control fever and pain. These treatments also help to prevent heart complications. Other medicines sometimes used are steroids and drugs which help to reduce the activity of the immune system.

Does Kawasaki disease get better?

Most children get better eventually although it can take weeks or even months to recover completely. Occasionally, inflammation of the heart muscle (carditis) can occur. Weakness and swelling of an artery supplying the heart tissue can develop: this is called a coronary artery aneurysm. If Kawasaki disease is diagnosed and treated early enough, complications are less likely to develop or are mild. Very rarely, they can cause significant long-term illness or can even be life-threatening.

Further reading

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