Refsum disease

Refsum disease is an inherited condition that causes vision loss, absence of the sense of smell (anosmia), and a variety of other signs and symptoms.

The vision loss associated with Refsum disease is caused by an eye disorder called retinitis pigmentosa. This disorder affects the retina, the light-sensitive layer at the back of the eye. Vision loss occurs as the light-sensing cells of the retina gradually deteriorate. The first sign of retinitis pigmentosa is usually a loss of night vision, which often becomes apparent in childhood. Over a period of years, the disease disrupts side (peripheral) vision and may eventually lead to blindness.

Vision loss and anosmia are seen in almost everyone with Refsum disease, but other signs and symptoms vary. About one-third of affected individuals are born with bone abnormalities of the hands and feet. Features that appear later in life can include progressive muscle weakness and wasting; poor balance and coordination (ataxia); hearing loss; and dry, scaly skin (ichthyosis). Additionally, some people with Refsum disease develop an abnormal heart rhythm (arrhythmia) and related heart problems that can be life-threatening.

Frequency

The prevalence of Refsum disease is unknown, although the condition is thought to be uncommon.

Causes

More than 90 percent of all cases of Refsum disease result from mutations in the PHYH gene. The remaining cases are caused by mutations in a gene called PEX7.

The signs and symptoms of Refsum disease result from the abnormal buildup of a type of fatty acid called phytanic acid. This substance is obtained from the diet, particularly from beef and dairy products. It is normally broken down through a process called alpha-oxidation, which occurs in cell structures called peroxisomes. These sac-like compartments contain enzymes that process many different substances, such as fatty acids and certain toxic compounds.

Mutations in either the PHYH or PEX7 gene disrupt the usual functions of peroxisomes, including the breakdown of phytanic acid. As a result, this substance builds up in the body’s tissues. The accumulation of phytanic acid is toxic to cells, although it is unclear how an excess of this substance affects vision and smell and causes the other specific features of Refsum disease.
Inheritance Pattern
This condition is inherited in an autosomal recessive pattern, which means both copies of the gene in each cell have mutations. The parents of an individual with an autosomal recessive condition each carry one copy of the mutated gene, but they typically do not show signs and symptoms of the condition.

Other Names for This Condition
- adult Refsum disease
- ARD
- classic Refsum disease
- CRD
- hereditary motor and sensory neuropathy Type IV
- heredopathia atactica polyneuritiformis
- HMSN IV
- HMSN type IV
- phytanic acid storage disease
- Refsum syndrome
- Refsum’s disease

Diagnosis & Management
Genetic Testing Information
- What is genetic testing?
  /primer/testing/genetictesting
- Genetic Testing Registry: Phytanic acid storage disease

Research Studies from ClinicalTrials.gov
- ClinicalTrials.gov
  https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/results?cond=%22Refsum+Disease%22+OR+%22Refsum+disease%22
Other Diagnosis and Management Resources

- GeneReview: Nonsyndromic Retinitis Pigmentosa Overview
  https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1417
- GeneReview: Refsum Disease
  https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1353
- MedlinePlus Encyclopedia: Retinitis Pigmentosa
  https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001029.htm

Additional Information & Resources

Health Information from MedlinePlus

- Encyclopedia: Retinitis Pigmentosa
  https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001029.htm
- Health Topic: Peripheral Nerve Disorders
  https://medlineplus.gov/peripheralnervedisorders.html
- Health Topic: Retinal Disorders
  https://medlineplus.gov/retinaldisorders.html
- Health Topic: Taste and Smell Disorders
  https://medlineplus.gov/tasteandsmelldisorders.html

Genetic and Rare Diseases Information Center

- Retinitis pigmentosa
  https://rarediseases.info.nih.gov/diseases/5694/retinitis-pigmentosa

Additional NIH Resources

- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: Refsum Disease Information Page
  https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Refsum-Disease-Information-Page
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: Smell Disorders
  https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/smell-disorders

Educational Resources

- MalaCards: refsum disease, classic
  https://www.malacards.org/card/refsum_disease_classic
- MalaCards: refsum disease, infantile form
  https://www.malacards.org/card/refsum_disease_infantile_form
- Orphanet: Refsum disease
  https://www.orpha.net/consor/cgi-bin/OC_Exp.php?Lng=EN&Expert=773
Patient Support and Advocacy Resources

• Foundation Fighting Blindness: Retinitis Pigmentosa
  https://www.fightingblindness.org/diseases/retinitis-pigmentosa

• Foundation for Ichthyosis & Related Skin Types
  http://www.firstskinfoundation.org/

• National Organization for Rare Disorders (NORD)
  https://rarediseases.org/rare-diseases/refsum-disease/

• National Tay Sachs & Allied Diseases Association
  https://www.ntsad.org/

• United Leukodystrophy Foundation
  https://ulf.org/

Clinical Information from GeneReviews

• Nonsyndromic Retinitis Pigmentosa Overview
  https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1417

• Refsum Disease
  https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1353

Scientific Articles on PubMed

• PubMed
  https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?term=%28Refsum%5BDisease%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+human%5Bmh%5D+AND+%22last+3600+days%22%5Bdp%5D

Catalog of Genes and Diseases from OMIM

• REFSUM DISEASE, CLASSIC
  http://omim.org/entry/266500

Sources for This Summary

• Jansen GA, Waterham HR, Wanders RJ. Molecular basis of Refsum disease: sequence variations in phytanoyl-CoA hydroxylase (PHYH) and the PTS2 receptor (PEX7). Hum Mutat. 2004 Mar;23(3):209-18. Review.
  Citation on PubMed: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14974078

  Citation on PubMed: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20850855

  Citation on PubMed: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14713215


Reviewed: November 2016
Published: August 6, 2019

Lister Hill National Center for Biomedical Communications
U.S. National Library of Medicine
National Institutes of Health
Department of Health & Human Services