Necrotizing Fasciitis—A Fearful Infection When Microbes Run Wild

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Some people still call it the "germ theory" even though microbe hunters like Koch and Lister proved that germs were killers more than a century ago. Tuberculosis germs cause tuberculosis. No equivocation there. Small pox viruses are the felons that cause small pox, and that's final. But thanks to Jenner in Merry Old England, the small pox scourge has been eliminated. Right on Dr. Jenner!

So it's safe to assume that man has triumphed over microbes, right? Wrong! By no stretch have we won the war. A few battles, certainly. We've snuffed out the polio conflagration except for a few hotspots here and there. That was a hard fought skirmish yielding a moment of complacency and then AIDS burst on the scene with wrath worthy of Mt. St. Helen's. The war goes on.

It's only recently that those "flesh eating bacteria" hit the headlines and generated some sound bites on the evening news. Is this, like AIDS, a new disease? Or simply an old gray-beard germ turned nasty? Let's look at that.

"Necrotizing Fasciitis (NF) is the name of a "new" illness, that is caused by some "old" germs. Those "flesh-eating" bacteria are familiar germs that combine forces to attack and destroy fascia; the tough bands and strands that supports bundles of muscle.

NF usually begins as a harmless looking infection of the skin. Leave it alone and it will go away like before. But no, over a day or so it spreads, becomes red and maybe it hurts a little. Now the epidermis becomes warm, then hot and the redness extends outward in all directions. At this point we call it cellulitis and germ warfare is imminent. Usually, we can predict the winner with accuracy. For by now the body has lined up millions of cell-sized soldiers (the white blood cells), and brigades of antibodies are already surrounding the swarming enemy. Sometimes, fortunately rarely, the defense is overwhelmed and in spite of all, even infusions of antibiotic drugs, the microbes break out with alarming fury and cellulitis ups the ante to become necrotizing fasciitis.

Now it's all out warfare as deep tissue is reduced to putrid liquid waste.

It's a red alert. Page the surgeons! Call in the operating room staff, the nurses and technicians. Break out the sterile drapes and gleaming instruments. Prepare for emergency surgery and wide extirpation of dead and dying tissues. Fortunately, most NT takes hold on the arms or legs. Fortunately indeed, because a patient can lose an extremity and survive. Not so when the NF involves the torso, abdomen, head or neck. No matter where surgeon's scalpel cuts it must excise boldly and completely. Not a germ can be left alive. Not a pretty picture is it!

This is the HealthWise message of the hour---We must not neglect even minor infections of the skin, especially if we are diabetic, or elderly or immunosuppressed for any reason. As in AIDS. Stay alert.
and the life you save may be your own.

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