

OPTIC NEURITIS (Optic Neuropathy)

Optic neuritis is an inflammation of the optic nerve, the "cable" transmitting visual information to the brain. Any inflammation of this nerve can interfere with your eyesight. When inflammation is mild, vision can be almost normal, but severe inflammation can cause loss of sight. Optic neuritis can occur in one or both eyes. If in both, it is typically more severe in one of them.

Symptoms

The first symptom you have may be blurred vision. Images may be hazy and colors look washed out. Exercise or a hot bath may make these symptoms worse. Over the next few days, vision may grow even dimmer and, in rare cases, even go totally dark. Your eye may ache, or you may have a dull pain or an uncomfortable pulling feeling whenever you move the eye, especially on looking up.

What causes optic neuritis?

Many conditions can cause the optic nerve to become inflamed. Several medical and neurological diseases can affect the myelin sheath (covering of the tiny nerve fibers within the optic nerve). Chemicals such as nicotine and alcohol can damage the nerve and cause a neuritis. Less common causes are bacterial or viral infection of the nervous system, a viral illness such as measles, mumps, or a cold (the neuritis can show up weeks, months, or even years later), or an insufficient blood supply.

Examination

Visual acuity will be measured with an eye chart, and a refraction will determine whether any decreased vision can be corrected with lenses. The contraction of your pupils will be checked with a flashlight. An ophthalmoscope will be used to look inside the eye to examine the optic nerve, and a visual field test may be done to determine the pattern of any lost vision. Special X-rays may be ordered, and consultation with a neurologist may be suggested.

Treatment and Prognosis

Most optic neuritis has no specific treatment. Fortunately, the inflammation almost always disappears on its own. You should stop smoking and using excess alcohol or other chemical substances until your attack is over (but preferably permanently). Mild pain reducers such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil), or acetaminophen (Tylenol) may be taken if you need them. If the condition lasts a long time and seems to be getting worse instead of better, you may be placed on oral medication or an injection, usually a cortisone derivative (steroid). Do not continue oral steroids for any longer than the instructions call for; such medications can cause serious side effects, so their use must be carefully monitored.

Most people have an attack of optic neuritis only once, the reason for that attack remains a mystery, and sight in the affected eye recovers completely. However, there may be a slight reduction in visual acuity or color vision afterwards.

Even after a full recovery, it is possible to have another attack in the future. Repeat attacks are more likely to result in permanent damage to vision. Therefore, if you should suffer a second attack, either in the same eye or in the other eye, you would be wise to have a complete medical examination to help identify a medical or neurological cause.