

Script – Print – Cushing syndrome is no laughing matter

Amy Schumer is known for her comedy, but it was no joke when she revealed recently that she had been diagnosed with Cushing syndrome.

"Cushing syndrome is a disorder where your body is making too much cortisol, which is a stress hormone," says Mary O'Meara, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare. "Cortisol is important for our body to function, and we need it, we can't go without it. However, there's certain times where your body is getting too much cortisol, and this can cause very serious health issues."

O'Meara says that the main cause of Cushing syndrome is pituitary and adrenal. The pituitary makes the adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), which moves through the body, and tells the adrenal glands to make cortisol. For example, if there is a tumor on the pituitary gland that secretes too much ACTH it can cause Cushing syndrome. Another cause of Cushing syndrome is a result of treatment with steroids for other diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and asthma.

Cushing syndrome is rare and typically affects adults who are 20 to 50 years old. Two thirds of the people affected by Cushing syndrome are female. O'Meara adds that it not uncommon for women to develop menstrual issues during this time as well.

Symptoms of Cushing syndrome vary. They include weight gain, skin changes, muscle loss and weakness, bone loss, prediabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, blood clots, infection and brain fog.

"The symptoms of Cushing syndrome are weight gain, mainly central obesity, which is in the middle of the body and not so much in the arms and the legs," says O'Meara. "You tend to get what we call moon face, so your face becomes very rounded and puffy looking. You see some people that we have to give steroids to for certain illnesses, they also get that puffy face. So, they will get that if they're getting too much of the natural cortisol inside their body as well."

O'Meara adds that treatment is always surgical to remove the excess cortisol that is being produced. The key, however, is treating the problem as soon as possible. If not, you can have lasting effects from high blood pressure and kidney issues or elevated blood sugar that Cushing syndrome can cause.

"Cushing is treatable. It is curable," says O'Meara. "You may have to go through specialized testing or sent to an endocrinologist, a specialist to really find out the root of the problem, where this extra excess hormone is coming from. If you're having these issues, and you think that you may fall into the categories where you have this problem, seek treatment, advocate for yourself, and find someone that can help you find a proper diagnosis."

Schumer's situation made news because fans noticed puffiness in her face during recent television interviews. O'Meara says if you notice the same thing with a friend or loved one, or yourself, act. The sooner, the better.