

Script – Print – Taking a swing at Guillain-Barré Syndrome

Freddie Freeman has plenty to be grateful for this holiday season. Not only did his Los Angeles Dodgers win the World Series in October, but the first baseman was named the series' most valuable player.

But the best news for Freeman and his wife is that their young son is recovering after a scary bout of Guillain-Barré (pronounced Ghee-yan Bah-ray) Syndrome (GBS).

"Guillain-Barré Syndrome is an illness that we see often in adults, but we can see it in children as well," says Asma Khan, DO, a pediatrician with OSF HealthCare. "It's an inflammation of the body. It's like an autoimmune disease but it's an inflammation where the body attacks its nerve cells."

While experts aren't sure of the exact cause of GBS, many people with Guillain-Barré exhibit early symptoms of an infection before a diagnosis is found. Freeman's three-year-old son, Max, first started experiencing symptoms in July when he developed a viral infection. When Max was unable to stand or walk without being in pain, his parents rushed him to the hospital.

"Usually there's an illness about a few weeks prior to the onset of Guillain-Barré, within four to six weeks prior, and it's either a GI infection or upper respiratory infection," says Dr. Khan.

Symptoms usually happen suddenly, can affect both sides of your body and start in the feet and legs. "We see signs of weakness," says Dr. Khan. "We see some nerve issues where they have numbness, tingling, and weakness of the muscles progresses from your lower extremities, from your legs all the way up, and it can even reach your eyes, your lungs. So, it's progressive."

While it's rare, anyone can get GBS, but it's more common in adults and especially in males. But Dr. Khan has seen a few cases in her pediatric practice.

"We notice the child having leg pain and refusing to walk or having an abnormal gait," she says. "That's usually your triggering factor that you notice first, and then, upon evaluation, you notice weakness in the lower extremities, and then the reflexes are diminished or absent."

The most severe problem is trouble breathing. Dr. Khan explains that as muscles and the chest wall get weaker, respiratory failure can occur. That's the reason hospitalization is so important.

"We want to make sure they're eating OK," she adds. "So as the weakness progresses, is it affecting their ability to swallow or choking? Do we need to give them a feeding tube? Do we need to give them fluids? And then the big thing that we need to really watch is respiratory status."

Treatment includes plasma exchange, which filters out the antibodies in the plasma that are attacking the nerves. Another treatment, intravenous immunoglobulin therapy (IVIG), involves IV injections of immunoglobulins which are proteins that the immune system makes. IVIG can reduce the immune system's attack on the nerves.

Physical, occupational and speech therapy may also be required, depending on the severity of the symptoms.

Dr. Khan says most people completely recover from Guillain-Barré Syndrome, but it can take six to 12 months, or longer. However, some people may experience lingering effects including weakness and fatigue.

Freeman has posted on his social media accounts that Max is back home and recovering. Still, the young boy has a long road ahead to regain his strength and learn to walk again.

For more information on children and Guillain-Barré Syndrome, visit the OSF HealthCare [website](#).