Study: Scleroderma Complications More Severe in Blacks Than Whites

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African Americans face more severe complications from systemic sclerosis, a.k.a. scleroderma, an autoimmune disease that affects the connective tissues of the skin, muscles and organs, according to a new study published in Arthritis & Rheumatism and reported by the American College of Rheumatology.

For the study, researchers examined the records of about 200 black patients and nearly 3,000 white patients treated for scleroderma at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center between 1972 and 2007 to see if a patient's race/ethnicity was a factor in the progression and severity of the illness. (Scleroderma is linked with serious health problems such as lung disease, joint pain, hardening of the skin, breathing issues and digestive problems.)

Findings showed that African American were more likely than their white counterparts to have antibodies that increased the likelihood and severity of pulmonary fibrosis (or scarring of the lungs). What's more, scientists noted that African Americans with scleroderma were also at greater risk of developing lung disease, which is the most common cause of death for people diagnosed with systemic sclerosis.

But the good news is that blacks who have this disease can improve their outcomes if they seek more aggressive treatment early, said Virginia Steen, MD, a professor of medicine at Georgetown University.

In addition, researchers are investigating the degree that genetic and environmental factors influence severe lung disease among African Americans with scleroderma.

Lupus is another autoimmune disease that hits black people hard. Click here to learn more about this possibly life-threatening condition.

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