

Doctors puzzled over bizarre infection surfacing in South Texas

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If diseases like AIDS and bird flu scare you, wait until you hear what's next. Doctors are trying to find out what is causing a bizarre and mysterious infection that's surfaced in South Texas.

Morgellons disease is not yet known to kill, but if you were to get it, you might wish you were dead, as the symptoms are horrible.

"These people will have like beads of sweat but it's black, black and tarry," said Ginger Savely, a nurse practitioner in Austin who treats a majority of these patients.

Patients get lesions that never heal.

"Sometimes little black specks that come out of the lesions and sometimes little fibers," said Stephanie Bailey, Morgellons patient.

Patients say that's the worst symptom — strange fibers that pop out of your skin in different colors.

"He'd have attacks and fibers would come out of his hands and fingers, white, black and sometimes red. Very, very painful," said Lisa Wilson, whose son Travis had Morgellon's disease.

While all of this is going on, it feels like bugs are crawling under your skin. So far more than 100 cases of Morgellons disease have been reported in South Texas.

"It really has the makings of a horror movie in every way," Savely said.

While Savely sees this as a legitimate disease, there are many doctors who simply refuse to acknowledge it exists, because of the bizarre symptoms patients are diagnosed as delusional.

"Believe me, if I just randomly saw one of these patients in my office, I would think they were crazy too," Savely said. "But after you've heard the story of over 100 (patients) and they're all — down to the most minute detail — saying the exact same thing, that becomes quite impressive."

Travis Wilson developed Morgellons just over a year ago. He called his mother in to see a fiber coming out of a lesion.

"It looked like a piece of spaghetti was sticking out about a quarter to an eighth of an inch long and it was sticking out of his chest," Lisa Wilson said. "I tried to pull it as hard as I could out and I could not pull it out."

The Wilson's spent \$14,000 after insurance last year on doctors and medicine.

"Most of them are antibiotics. He was on Tamadone for pain. Viltricide, this was an anti-parasitic. This was to try and protect his skin because of all the lesions and stuff," Lisa said.

However, nothing worked, and 23-year-old Travis could no longer take it.

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"I knew he was going to kill himself, and there was nothing I could do to stop him," Lisa Wilson said.

Just two weeks ago, Travis took his life.

Stephanie Bailey developed the lesions four-and-a-half years ago.

"The lesions come up, and then these fuzzy things like spores come out," she said.

She also has the crawling sensation.

"You just want to get it out of you," Bailey said.

She has no idea what caused the disease, and nothing has worked to clear it up.

"They (doctors) told me I was just doing this to myself, that I was nuts. So basically I stopped going to doctors because I was afraid they were going to lock me up," Bailey said.

Harriett Bishop has battled Morgellons for 12 years. After a year on antibiotics, her hands have nearly cleared up. On the day, we visited her she only had one lesion and she extracted this fiber from it.

"You want to get these things out to relieve the pain, and that's why you pull and then you can see the fibers there, and the tentacles are there, and there are millions of them," Bishop said.

So far, pathologists have failed to find any infection in the fibers pulled from lesions.

"Clearly something is physically happening here," said Dr. Randy Wymore, a researcher at the Morgellons Research Foundation at Oklahoma State University's Center for Health Sciences.

Wymore examines the fibers, scabs and other samples from Morgellon's patients to try and find the disease's cause.

"These fibers don't look like common environmental fibers," he said.

The goal at OSU is to scientifically find out what is going on. Until then, patients and doctors struggle with this mysterious and bizarre infection. Thus far, the only treatment that has showed some success is an antibiotic.

"It sounds a little like a parasite, like a fungal infection, like a bacterial infection, but it never quite fits all the criteria of any known pathogen," Savely said

No one knows how Morgellans is contracted, but it does not appear to be contagious. The states with the highest number of cases are Texas, California and Florida.

The only connection found so far is that more than half of the Morgellons patients are also diagnosed with Lyme disease.

For more information on Morgellons, visit the research foundation's Web site at www.morgellons.org.

Online at: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA051106.morgellans.KENS.32030524.html>