

Kaposi 's Sarcoma Explained

People will believe just about anything that they see on the big screen. This becomes evident when you begin asking people what Kaposi's sarcoma is. Anyone who's seen the movie 'Philadelphia' will tell you that Kaposi's sarcoma is a disease related to AIDS, because that's what Tom Hanks told them. In reality, they're only half right. While people who have AIDS may develop Kaposi's sarcoma, there is much more to the condition, which is actually a form of cancer.

Dr. Moritz Kaposi originally wrote about this condition in 1872. Kaposi initially believed that younger men of African descent and older European men of Jewish or Italian heritage were most likely to suffer this disease. Eventually, it was discovered that organ transplant patients were also at risk of acquiring the condition. Originally very few women suffered this disease, with a ratio of just one woman for every fifteen male patients. Since the onset of AIDS, however, the ration has changed drastically. Today, there is one female patient for every male with Kaposi's sarcoma. Researchers are not sure why this trend has changed.

Once the occurrence of HIV became to rise more than twenty years ago, AIDS became the most prevalent source of current Kaposi's sarcoma cases. Thanks to improved treatment methods for HIV and AIDS, however, the incidences of this type of sarcoma have dropped by more than 80 percent over the last five years. That's a huge step in the right direction!

Kaposi's sarcoma is not life threatening, but it can have devastating effects. The disease causes lesions on the skin. These sores can be painful and disfiguring and, depending on where they are located, may swell. The lesions associated with Kaposi's sarcoma usually occur in the nose, mouth, anus or genital areas. Some patients develop the sores on the legs, while others are affected in the areas surrounding the eyes. The lesions from Kaposi's sarcoma resemble large blemishes and can be red, purple or brownish in color.

Neither the size, nor the appearance of Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, is of particular concern to doctors. The dangerous thing about this condition is that it can spread to vital organs including the lungs, liver and gastrointestinal tract. At this point, the disease goes from disfiguring to life threatening. It causes serious bleeding in the gastrointestinal tract, and difficulty breathing when found in the lungs.

Kaposi's sarcoma, or KS, can be divided into three sub-groups: African KS, Transplant-Related KS and AIDS-Related KS. Each category has a slightly different set of issues to deal with. African KS was discovered in Equatorial Africa. While this type of the disease can start earlier than the others, it doesn't usually spread to the body's internal organs. Sometimes the disease will strike young children pre-puberty, developing in girls one third as frequently as the boys. This fatal form of the disease can kill within three years. Transplant-Related KS is 150 times more likely to develop in transplant patients, because of the immune suppressing drugs that are taken, but usually only affects the skin. The third category of Kaposi's sarcoma, the AIDS-Related type, can be the worst to deal with. Fortunately, new treatments have improved doctor's abilities to provide relief of symptoms and greatly reduce the incidences of this disease in AIDS sufferers.

Don't believe everything you see on the big screen. While Kaposi's sarcoma is an AIDS-related disease, it's not only AIDS patients who suffer from it. Anyone with a weakened or suppressed immune system is at risk of developing Kaposi's sarcoma.