

WHAT IS INTERSTITIAL LUNG DISEASE (ILD)?

Interstitial lung disease (ILD) is a name given to a group of rare lung conditions that cause chronic breathlessness. ILD causes inflammation of the lung tissue which leads to scarring (fibrosis) of the air sacs (alveoli) that interferes with the ability of the lungs to deliver oxygen. If the problem gets worse, the lungs become stiff, and shrink resulting in increased breathlessness.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

ILD sufferers usually complain of breathlessness when they exert themselves and occasionally may experience a dry cough. It is uncommon for people to develop breathlessness at rest, chest pains or to cough up phlegm.

WHAT CAUSES ILD?

Most interstitial lung diseases are caused by the body's own inflammation and repair system. Sometimes this disorder only affects the lung; common diseases of this variety include the **idiopathic interstitial pneumonias**, such as **idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis**. Some ILD's are caused by widespread disease in the body such as Sarcoidosis, Rheumatoid arthritis and Scleroderma. ILD can also be caused by viral and bacterial infections such as pneumonia and fungal infections. Drugs taken for other diseases such as Bleomycin and Amiodarone can have side effects which can damage the lung. Radiation for breast or lung cancer can cause lung damage long after they receive the treatment and occupational hazards including asbestos, coal dust and sand (silica) dust can also cause lung damage.

TREATMENT OF ILD

Smoking cessation, maintenance of ideal body weight and vaccination against influenza and pneumococcal infection is recommended for patients with ILD. In cases where inhalation of foreign material or a medication is felt to be the cause of the ILD, removal of the offending agent is a critical step in preventing worsening of the condition. Do not stop any medication without speaking to your doctor first.

Depending on the type of ILD and its severity, treatment with immune-suppressing medication, such as prednisolone, may be required.

A course of pulmonary rehabilitation is often of benefit to patients, providing an exercise program, education and emotional support.

Patients with low oxygen levels may also benefit from oxygen therapy.

International guidelines suggest that patients diagnosed with ILD should be managed in a specialist centre, with access to clinical trials and the availability of lung transplantation for suitable candidates.