



Nanaimo man brings attention to condition

BY DARRELL BELLAART, DAILY NEWS APRIL 27, 2013

A life-threatening disease was hardly the diagnosis Nanaimo's Dave Lee expected from his doctor to explain his mood changes.

In 2011 Lee found out he has hemochromatosis, a condition in which the body absorbs too much iron from food, which can eventually cause death from organ failure.

It is the most common hereditary disease, affecting one in 327 Canadians, yet its symptoms can easily be overlooked, even by experienced doctors.

It is most prevalent among white people, especially men, since women shed iron through menstruation.

It's easy to treat, if caught early, but the key is education.

Men with hemochromatosis usually show signs of the disease in mid-life, while it typically strikes women in their sixties. Lee was 40 when he started feeling depressed, short-tempered and became tired out early.

He took his wife's advice to see a doctor, who at first suggested antidepressants.

"I said: 'No, I don't want to do anything drug-related. I want to figure out if there is anything physical wrong, first,'" Lee said.

A blood test for ferritin, a protein used to store iron in the blood, showed he was three times the maximum normal range - a warning sign. An iron saturation test also came back high.

The third, and final, test confirmed a hemochromatosis diagnosis: Lee carries both copies of the mutated gene associated with the disease.

The condition interferes with the body's ability to shut off its iron-storing mechanism when enough iron is available. At first it stores excess iron in the liver, then in the heart, pituitary gland and elsewhere in the body. Untreated, damage to the liver, heart, and pancreas can cause death.

Treatment is simple. Removing blood, or a phlebotomy, lowers the iron load. In September, 2011, Lee started with 500 millilitres of blood removed every two weeks, but now he's down to once a month.

He isn't too fond of needles, but with treatment, his energy has returned and his mood is now stabilized.

May is designated Hemo-chro-matosis Awareness Month. To learn more, visit <http://www.cdnhemochromatosis.ca>.

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