

# Guillian-Barre Syndrome

## What is Guillian-Barre Syndrome?

Guillian-Barre syndrome is an extremely rare disorder in which the body's immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system. It is called a syndrome, not a disease because it is not believed to be caused by a specific disease causing agent. Incidence is 1-2 per 100,000 of population, occurring most frequently in young adults and in older persons between the ages of 30 and 50.

Guillian-Barre syndrome can be devastating because of its sudden unexpected onset. In most cases the greatest weakness is experienced within the first two weeks after symptoms appear. By the third week, 90% of patients are at their weakest. Recovery may be experienced within a few weeks, or may take years. 30% will still experience residual weakness years later. A few may suffer a relapse of muscle weakness and tingling sensations many years after the initial attack.

In some cases symptoms progress very rapidly with complete paralysis of legs, arms, and breathing muscles over the course of just a few hours.

## What causes Guillian-Barre Syndrome?

Frequently the exact cause is unknown, but sometimes it is triggered by a respiratory infection, surgery, or immunization. It is evidently an auto-immune disorder wherein the body's immune system attacks the myelin sheath, the layer of insulation surrounding the nerve fibers. When the myelin is damaged the nerves cannot transmit the impulses properly. At present Guillian-Barre syndrome cannot be prevented.

## Guillian-Barre Syndrome may also be triggered by:

- Hodgkin's disease
- Mononucleosis
- HIV virus



By Donald V. Victorson,  
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## What are the Symptoms of Guillian-Barre Syndrome?

In the early stages, weakness in the hands and feet, arms, and legs, abdomen, and chest. The weakness spreads rapidly.

As it progresses many of the following may be experienced:

- Muscle pain is quite common.
- Difficulty walking is common, especially in children.
- Life-threatening Respiratory Paralysis in 30% of cases.
- In 50% of cases, extreme changes in Blood Pressure, Cardiac Arrhythmia, as well as Bowel and Bladder paralysis, also facial nerve paralysis.

## How is Guillian-Barre Syndrome diagnosed?

Guillian-Barre syndrome can be difficult to diagnose, its symptoms are similar to those of other neurological disorders. The onset of symptoms is usually very rapid, and muscle weakness is usually experienced on both sides of the body, not on one side of the body as in a stroke.

A spinal tap and nerve function tests are commonly used to confirm the diagnosis.

## How is Guillian-Barre Syndrome treated?

There is no known cure for Guillian-Barre syndrome.

There are however two treatments that appear to speed recovery and minimize the severity of the disorder.

These are:

- **Plasmapheresis** – a type of blood cleansing to remove damaged anti-bodies from the blood.
- **Intravenous Immunoglobulin** – high doses of healthy antibodies from healthy donors can help block the damaging antibodies that may be contributing to the condition.

## What are the complications of Guillian-Barre Syndrome?

Approximately 80% of those with Guillian-Barre syndrome experience a complete recovery, although some of these continue to have residual weakness and abnormal numbness or tingling. Five to Ten percent experience more serious permanent problems, and in a few cases severe dis-

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## YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

ability. Approximately ten percent will experience a relapse.

### Possible complications include:

- Paralysis and/or permanent weakness.
- Paralysis of eyelid muscles and consequent eye damage.
- Thrombophlebitis and/ or Pneumonia.
- Respiratory failure.

40 to 50% make a complete recovery, however 40 to 50% are left with some residual disability as a result of Guillian-Barre syndrome.

### Underwriting Prognosis

Where it can be established, following a reasonable recovery period that there has been a complete recovery with no residual effects it should be possible to obtain insurance on a Standard basis.

Where following recovery, the client is still experiencing residual weakness and/or other symptoms a rating may be necessary.

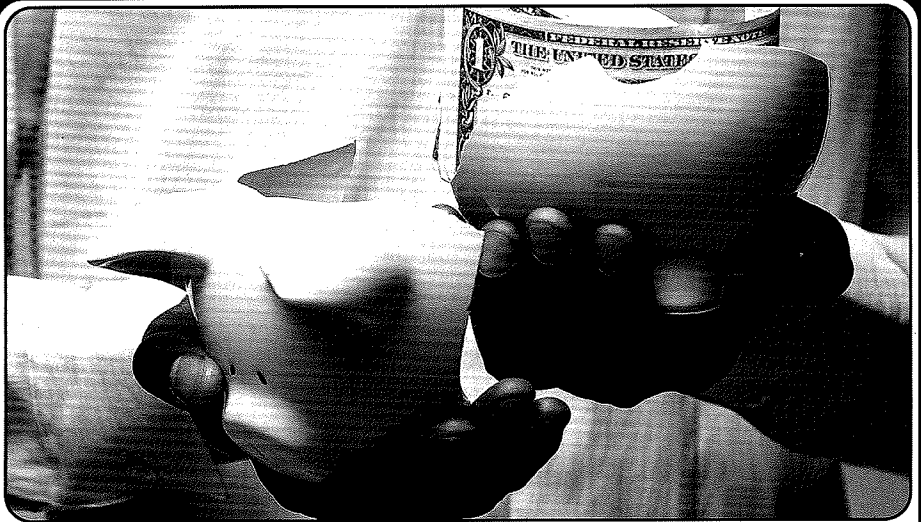
In cases involving severe disability the client is almost always found to be uninsurable.

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