

# Mail Today

## I thought it was only chicken pox

BY RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

**C**HICKEN POX is a disease all of us associate with childhood. To be covered in an itchy rash was almost embarrassing for 25-year-old Rajkumar Sharma. Even his friends teased him about the fact that his one-year-old son had more immunity than him! Little did he know that the situation was actually no laughing matter. Chicken pox developed into an autoimmune disease — ADEM — in his body, paralysing him. This rare but lethal complication of chicken pox produced multiple lesions in the white matter of the brain and along the spinal cord. "The antibodies that were supposed to combat the chicken pox virus attacked his body instead. This happens when antibodies formed against chicken pox virus cross react and attack the body's own tissues rendering the immune system ineffective," explains Dr Mayank Chawla, the neurologist at Max hospital, who treated Rajkumar.

### OUR IMMUNE SYSTEM CAN TURN AGAINST ITSELF

Sometimes our immune systems fail us. The trigger could be a virus or even your own genetic makeup that leads to the immune system's attack on healthy cells in the body by mistake, resulting in what is called an autoimmune disease. "Our bodies have an immune system that protects us from disease and infection. But if you have an autoimmune disease, your immune system attacks itself by mistake, and you can get very sick," says Dr Chawla. Adds specialist in internal medicine, Dr Rakesh Gupta that autoimmune disease can be of two types; organ specific, like vitiligo which affects the skin and systemic, which affects multiple organs in the body — like in Rajkumar's case. While the rashes and the itching caused by chicken pox receded in his body, little did he know that a new set of problems were on their way. "I had been feeling

### CHICKEN POX IS NO LAUGHING MATTER

In the olden days no one believed in vaccination for chicken pox and you were supposed to get the disease naturally. The only problem with this idea is that if you didn't contract this pox as a child, it causes a host of complications if it strikes you as an adult. The good news is that there is a vaccine available for it now and provides lifelong immunity. Once infected by chicken pox, the virus never leaves the body. And if your immune system is weak to boot, you effectively open your door wide for nasty ailments like neurological problems, encephalitis, severe pneumonia and joint infections and autoimmune disease says Dr Sanjeev Bagal, HOD pediatrics, Rockland Hospital. The vaccine costs around Rs 1200. So if you thought you were too old to get either chicken pox or vaccinated, think again.

weak even after I was cured of chicken pox but I thought that was usual after an illness. Then one month later, I got up from the bed to visit the toilet and felt my legs give away," says Rajkumar. At first the family thought that he was still weak from his illness but when the sensation in his legs vanished, his worried family rushed him to their family doctor who was unable to find a reason for his condition. The weakness in his legs worsened till he finally lost sensation and stopped being able to walk. He made it to the emergency room of Max Hospital, Gurgaon just in time: 24 hours after Dr Chawla saw him, Rajkumar's health started deteriorating at an alarming rate. Paralysis struck every part, hampering his breathing and ability to talk. When he began having seizures, an MRI revealed that his spinal cord and the white matter of his brain were badly affected. The diagnosis of ADEM came after extensive tests. "The antibodies formed in his system to combat the varicella zoster, or the chicken pox virus attacked his own body. A good way to ensure that your immune system is strong enough to avoid any such complications is to get timely vaccinations," says Dr Chawla.



Rajkumar says he will never take everyday activities like walking or driving for granted again

PHOTO: RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

### TREATMENT INVOLVED BOOSTING THE IMMUNITY

The doctors at Max swung into action and Rajkumar was hooked on to the ventilator and started on intravenous steroids, antibiotics, anti seizure medication. In addition he was started on a 5 day course of IVIG — antibodies to inactivate the auto-antibodies that were wreaking havoc on his system. This life-saving treatment of IVIG course cost 3 lakh rupees. After a harrowing hospital ordeal, Rajkumar's seizures were finally controlled.

### PHYSIOTHERAPY BROUGHT HIS MOBILITY BACK

"I used to float in an out of consciousness. The numbness of my body was always on my mind during my lucid moments and I was very scared because I thought I would forever be dependent on machines to breathe and move," says Rajkumar. Physiotherapy was the saving grace. After being discharged, Rajkumar had to begin rigorous sessions of physiotherapy which

brought him to tears because of the pain and at times left him feeling frustrated at the sluggishness of his limbs. "Not to be able to play with my son and constantly have to worry and be embarrassed about my persistent incontinence made my life living hell," he says. But he persevered, gradually regaining the strength of his legs and eight months later, he now drives to work as he used to. Though he still continues with physiotherapy, he is a happier and wiser man now.

### DIAGNOSIS IS NOT EASY

There are more than 80 types of autoimmune diseases and symptoms may range from unexplained weight loss, anaemia, sudden and mysterious fatigue and even fever. It is important you see a doctor in case you find your health deteriorating without reason. "Earlier these diseases went undetected because the doctors couldn't determine the cause but advances in diagnostic tools makes it easier today to repeatedly test a person till a conclusion is reached," says Dr Gupta.

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