

Haemangiomas

What is an haemangioma?

Haemangiomas are benign growths of blood vessels affecting approximately 4% of babies. They usually appear in the first few weeks of life and grow for up to 6-9 months. They then slowly resolve over a period of 2-5 years. Most haemangiomas don't cause any problems and do not require treatment; however, a small percentage have the potential to do harm. The cause is not well understood but the placenta is thought to play a role in their development.

Which haemangiomas should be referred for possible treatment?

Many facial haemangiomas need early evaluation. They have the potential to block critical structures such as the eye, nose and airway. Some facial haemangiomas are also a clue there may be other developmental problems (the PHACE syndrome). Ulcerated haemangiomas need prompt treatment as they are very painful and can be a source of infection. Rapidly growing haemangiomas on cosmetically important sites are also worthy of evaluation. Although they will ultimately go away, they often leave stretched or scarred skin which can be prevented with early treatment.

What treatments are available?

Propranolol is a beta blocker medication which has been available for many years, mostly used in children with heart problems and adults with high blood pressure. Lower doses in older children and adults are also used to prevent migraine and tremor. In June 2008, in the New England Journal of Medicine, a French group reported on its use in babies with rapidly growing haemangiomas. Since then, its use has become very widespread around the world. Its actual mechanism of action is still unknown but it appears to switch off growth in young infants with rapidly growing haemangiomas and it accelerates involution (the "going away" process) in older children. It has replaced the use of oral corticosteroids.

Ulcerated haemangiomas are often treated with pulsed dye laser, in addition to propranolol. Laser is also used to clear away residual vessels after involution.

What are the side effects of propranolol?

Propranolol is usually very well tolerated. Side effects can include:

- Slower heart rate and reduced blood pressure
- Reduced blood sugar level
- Cold extremities
- Sleep disturbances or nightmares
- Bronchospasm (wheezing) – should be used with caution in babies with airway diseases or children with asthma
- Very rarely, reduced body temperature

Contact your doctor immediately if your child develops

- severe breathing difficulties, cough or wheeze
- looks cold, limp, blue (signs of low blood sugar or low blood pressure)
- if this happens, feed baby immediately

Never stop the medicine suddenly – it should be gradually reduced.

After it has been phased out (usually between 7 and 9 mths of age) there may be slight increase in fullness of the haemangioma. If the haemangioma starts to grow again contact your doctor as the medicine may need to be started again.