

I thought it was only chicken pox

BY RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

CHICKEN 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 — DEM — 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 Jayank Chawla, the neurologist at Max hospital, who treated Rajkumar.

YOUR 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

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 Bagai, 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



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

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 helped

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