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Doctors to rid woman of 'second head'

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Kolkata: She is being referred to as the 'woman with two heads'. A tumour on the right side of Lakshmi Das' face is indeed the size of her head. It measures 20 cm by 20 cm and has covered her mouth, nose, the entire right cheek and the right side of her forehead. The ugly lump prevents her from breathing freely and keeps her head tilted to the right. On Friday, Das, a resident of Bihar, will undergo a 12-hour surgery — that will include a face reconstruction procedure — to get rid of the life-threatening cancerous tumour at a city hospital.

Suffering from a condition known as sarcoma, the 35-year-old was admitted to hospital last week. "It was a scary sight, for the tumour has grown as big as her head. She hasn't been able to feed through the mouth for months. A cancerous growth like this has to be surgically removed. But the surgery is going to be a long and complicated one, for her face will have to be reconstructed once the tumour has been removed. A substantial portion of flesh and bones on the face will have to be sacrificed with the tumour," explained oncologist Gautam Mukhopadhyay who will remove the tumour. Once the tumour has been extracted, plastic surgeon Anupam Gulash will reconstruct the face. Flesh and bones from her legs will be used for the purpose.

Surgical removal of a tumour of this size is rare, said doctors. "Head and neck tumours rarely grow to this size. In this case, the patient had neglected it in the early stages. She was on homoeopathy, which yielded no result. By the time she sought allopathic treatment, the tumour had grown as big as her head," said Mukhopadhyay. A micro-vascular reconstruction procedure will be done to rebuild Das' face. It could take nine hours, after the tumour had been removed in three hours.

Micro-vascular reconstructive surgery involves the transfer of autogenous vascularized tissue to reconstruct extensive tissue defects. Areas commonly reconstructed include the jaws and mouth, the throat and all areas of the face, scalp, and neck. It's an intricate procedure and a successful outcome in this type of reconstructive surgery depends on meticulous suturing of 2 to 3mm blood vessels using a microscope and sutures that are finer than human hair to re-establish blood flow to the tissue graft. Due to the technically demanding nature of this surgery, the rate of failure is high, around 5 to 10%.

But in Das' case, the doctors are confident of the outcome being positive. "It's an aggressive tumour that is big and cancerous. This is a deadly combination. But the surgery can be safely done and her face reconstructed. Post-surgery, her looks will change, but she will lead a normal, healthy life. More importantly, her quality of life will improve," said Mukhopadhyay.

Chances of the sarcoma recurring are not being ruled out. But Das' chances of survival are high after the surgery. "She will be reasonably safe for the next few years," said Mukhopadhyay.

GIFT OF LIFE WHAT IS LAKSHMI DAS SUFFERING FROM?

A 20cmX20cm cancerous tumour that has covered her mouth, nose, right cheek and the right side of her forehead. Her condition is known as sarcoma

WHAT IS SARCOMA?

Malignant tumours made of cancerous bone, cartilage, fat, muscle, vascular or hematopoietic tissues. These are relatively uncommon tumours

WHAT MAKES IT MORE COMPLICATED?

A substantial portion of flesh and bones on Das' face will have to be sacrificed with the tumour. So, she will need a micro-vascular reconstructive surgery, which is a technically demanding procedure