

Raynaud's disease

Raynaud's disease is a condition that affects the blood supply to certain parts of the body, usually the fingers and toes. It is also referred to as Raynaud's syndrome, Raynaud's phenomenon or just Raynaud's. About 1 in 20 people develop Raynaud's.

It is due to a narrowing (constriction) of the small blood vessels on exposure to the cold, or to a change in temperature, or to emotional stress. The blood vessels go into a temporary spasm, temporarily blocking the flow of blood. This causes skin to change colour to white, then blue and then finally red as blood flow returns.

Symptoms include pain, numbness and pins and needles in the affected areas. Symptoms of tingling, pain, etc usually occur as the blood vessels open up again allowing a return of blood-flow, for example, when the hand warms up after being cold. Symptoms can vary from a few minutes to several hours. Raynaud's is usually triggered by cold temperatures or by anxiety or stress. Raynaud's is not a serious medical condition, but is a nuisance. There can be long periods without any symptoms and sometimes the condition disappears altogether.

Types of Raynaud's

There are two types of Raynaud's, primary and secondary Raynaud's. Primary Raynaud's is when there is no obvious medical cause and is the most common type. Primary Raynaud's tends to run in families. Women are affected more often than men. It usually first develops before the age of 30. About 1 in 10 people with primary Raynaud's develop a condition associated with secondary Raynaud's such as lupus.

Secondary Raynaud's is when it is caused by another health condition. Most cases of secondary Raynaud's are associated with autoimmune conditions, where the immune system attacks healthy tissue. These include:

- rheumatoid arthritis: the immune system attacks the joints causing pain and swelling
- lupus: the immune system attacks many different parts of the body causing a range of symptoms, such as tiredness, joint pain and skin rashes

Hand-arm vibration syndrome (vibration white finger) is a common cause of secondary Raynaud's. This is caused by using vibrating tools regularly over a long time which cause damage to the blood vessels and their nerve supply.

Self help

It may be possible to control the symptoms of Raynaud's by avoiding triggers such as cold weather, wearing gloves and using relaxation techniques when feeling stressed. Smoking can affect circulation and can exacerbate or even be a cause of symptoms so quitting smoking is important. Some drugs cause the blood vessels to narrow so can be a trigger in some people; these can include beta-blockers, some anti-migraine drugs and decongestants. Avoid these drugs if they cause a problem. Caffeine can trigger symptoms in some people so should be avoided if it does. Regular exercise can help circulation.

Medication

When symptoms fail to improve nifedipine may be prescribed. Nifedipine is a calcium channel blocker and has been used to treat high blood pressure in the past. It encourages blood vessels to widen which helps prevent them going into spasm. Depending on response to treatment, nifedipine may be used on an ongoing basis. Sometimes it is taken on a preventative basis; for example, during cold weather.

Side effects are common so nifedipine is generally reserved for severe cases. Side effects can include swelling (usually of hands and feet), flushing, headache and dizziness. Grapefruit juice must be avoided when taking nifedipine as it can make the side effects worse.

Surgery

Surgery is usually reserved for when symptoms are so severe that there is a risk the affected body part, such as fingers, could totally lose their blood supply and begin to die. A surgical procedure called sympathectomy is used. It involves cutting the nerves causing the affected blood vessels to go into spasm. Sympathectomy prevents tissue loss and usually eases pain caused by raynauds. However the results of sympathectomy are often only temporary and further treatment or surgery may be required after a few years.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

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