

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Dec 20, 2017

Raynaud's phenomenon

Raynaud's phenomenon is a condition that can suddenly cut off the blood flow to parts of your body, usually your fingers and toes, for a short period of time.

What is Raynaud's phenomenon?

If you have Raynaud's phenomenon, your fingers, toes, and other parts of your body suddenly become numb, white, and cold.

This happens because small blood vessels in your fingers and toes narrow and stop your blood flowing normally. Most people get attacks when the temperature is cold, but some people get attacks if they feel upset or stressed. Women get it more than men do. Just a small change in temperature can trigger an attack.

Nobody knows what causes Raynaud's phenomenon for most people. But some people get Raynaud's phenomenon because of another illness, such as rheumatoid arthritis or an immune system illness called lupus. This is more likely for people who first get Raynaud's phenomenon when they are over 40 years of age. People who work with vibrating tools, such as road diggers, also have a higher chance of getting Raynaud's phenomenon. Your doctor will check to see if your Raynaud's phenomenon is caused by any other conditions.

This information is about treating Raynaud's phenomenon that is not connected to a more serious condition.

What are the symptoms?

Having Raynaud's phenomenon is not the same as just having cold hands. During a Raynaud's attack some or all of your fingers suddenly go very pale. There will be a clear division between the normal-coloured skin and the very pale skin.

This may also affect your toes, ear lobes, and nose (and more rarely your tongue and nipples). Your fingers will feel cold, may tingle, and feel numb or painful.

Because your fingers aren't getting enough oxygen, they may then turn blue. As the blood returns to your fingers, they turn very red and may throb and hurt. The attack can last for anything from a few minutes up to a few hours.

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Raynaud's phenomenon can be painful and worrying, but it is usually not serious. The symptoms should disappear completely after each attack.

What treatments work?

Keeping warm is the best way to prevent attacks. Medicine can help if your symptoms are severe.

Things you can do for yourself

Keeping warm is the best thing you can do to prevent Raynaud's attacks. You need to keep your whole body warm to stop your fingers and toes over-reacting to the cold. Here are a few ideas:

- Wear layers of loose-fitting clothing
- Wear hats and mittens in cold weather
- Keep your feet dry
- Wear gloves or socks in bed during winter
- Use portable heating aids and warmers for your hands and feet if you need to stay outside for a long time.

Also, remember that air conditioning can make rooms very cool.

During an attack, warm your hands, feet, or the affected part of your body by going indoors. You can use warm water to help warm up the affected part.

It is important to stop smoking, if you are a smoker. The chemicals in tobacco may make symptoms worse. Ask your doctor if any medicines you are taking could make Raynaud's worse.

You can also try learning to control stress, especially if your attacks start when you are upset or stressed.

Ibuprofen or paracetamol can help with the pain.

Medicines

Medicines are not usually needed, unless your symptoms are severe. Some medicines may reduce the number of Raynaud's attacks you get, or make them less severe. These include calcium channel blockers, a type of medicine also used for treating heart problems.

If calcium channel blockers do not work, or if you can't take them for some reason, your doctor may prescribe one of a number of alternative drugs. These include an ACE inhibitor, an SSRI, or a vasodilator.

Common side effects for the drugs used for Raynaud's phenomenon include feeling light-headed and flushing. In rare cases, people get puffy feet or heart palpitations.

What will happen to me?

For most people with Raynaud's phenomenon, the attacks are a minor but uncomfortable problem.

If your symptoms are mild then you probably won't need to take medicine. But you may need to have tests to see if having Raynaud's phenomenon is linked to another condition. If your symptoms are more severe, there are medicines that can help.

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