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Causes of severe hypotension

Blood pressure is one of the most important health indicators that directly affects the overall well-being of the human body. It plays a key role in the optimal functioning of the cardiovascular and circulatory systems. Owing to its impact on the supply of blood throughout the body, it is essential to maintain healthy blood pressure levels. When it comes to blood pressure, having low levels is generally considered desirable. But this is not true in every scenario. In some cases, abnormally low blood pressure (hypotension) can lead to dizziness and loss of consciousness. Chronically low blood pressure can also signal an underlying health condition such as an inadequate flow of blood to vital organs. Although rare, severe hypotension can lead to life-threatening complications. Hypotension is a condition in which the systolic blood pressure level is equal to or below 90 mm Hg and diastolic blood pressure level is equal to or below 60 mm Hg. Usually, blood pressure levels vary throughout the course of the day. As a result, a drop in blood pressure levels is usually temporary. Nevertheless, there are certain factors that can cause blood pressure levels to remain chronically low. Having chronic hypotension can be an indicator of an underlying health problem, especially when the drop in blood pressure is too steep or sudden. Some of the most symptoms of hypotension are: Weakness or fatigue Dizziness Lightheadedness Blurry vision Shallow breathing Unsteadiness Nausea Fainting or loss of consciousness Pale, cold, or clammy skin Difficulty in concentration Depression Depending on the factors contributing to low blood pressure, hypotension is classified into four major types: The condition is characterized by a fall in blood pressure levels when an individual stands up suddenly after lying or sitting for a while. Normally, when a person stands, gravity causes the blood to pool in his or her legs. To overcome this, the body increases the heart rate and constricts the blood vessels to ensure enough blood reaches the brain. However, in orthostatic hypotension, this does not happen which results in a sudden fall in blood pressure levels. Orthostatic hypotension can also be caused by prolonged bed rest, cardiovascular conditions, dehydration, diabetes, excessive heart, pregnancy, and certain neuro disorders. It usually affects older individuals but can also affect younger individuals. The condition causes a drop in blood pressure levels after consumption of a meal. Usually, the blood flows to the digestive tract once an individual consumes a meal. This causes the heart to increase the heart rate and narrow blood vessels to maintain normal blood pressure levels. However, in people with postprandial hypotension, the mechanism fails and results in symptoms such as dizziness or lightheadedness. The condition usually affects older individuals, people with hypertension (high blood pressure), or those with autonomic nervous system disorders (such as Parkinson's disease). Neurally mediated hypotension The condition is similar to orthostatic hypotension. In this condition, a person experiences a decline in blood pressure levels after standing or exercising for a longer duration of time. Neurally mediated hypotension occurs owing to a lack of coordinated communication between the brain and the heart. The disorder usually affects younger individuals and children. Shock-induced severe hypotension The condition occurs when a person is in shock. Shock triggers a dangerous fall in blood pressure levels. As a result of severe hypotension, the brain and other vital organs do not get enough blood and oxygen to function optimally. Without prompt treatment, severe hypotension can lead to life-threatening complications, such as a damaged heart or brain. Hypotension is a medical condition that can be caused by multiple factors. Some of the most common causes include: A low intake of water can cause a significant drop in blood pressure. Dehydration can result in symptoms such as dizziness, weakness, and fatigue. Strenuous exercise or physical activity, overuse of diuretics, vomiting, and severe diarrhoea are some of the major risk factors for dehydration. Regular intake of a diet that is low in micronutrients such as iron, folate, and vitamin B12, can restrict the production of red blood cells (anemia), leading to low blood pressure. Certain cardiovascular conditions such as arrhythmias, heart failure, low heart rate (bradycardia), and heart attack can lead to hypotension. Certain endocrinal conditions such as low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), parathyroid disease, adrenal insufficiency (Addison's disease), and, diabetes can bring about a drop in blood pressure. Pregnancy can trigger a short-term drop in blood pressure. During pregnancy, the circulatory system of women expands which results in temporary hypotension. Post-pregnancy, the blood pressure returns to normal levels. Loss of blood triggered by an injury or internal bleeding can cause a decrease in the amount of blood flowing in the circulatory system. This can lead to a decline in blood pressure levels. A severe drop in blood pressure can be an indicator of septic shock, a life-threatening complication. When an infection enters the bloodstream, it results in a medical condition known as sepsis. To fight the infection, the immune system of the body releases certain chemicals that cause inflammation throughout the body. An uncontrolled inflammatory response can lead to septic shock. A significant drop in blood pressure can be triggered by a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Severe allergic reactions can also cause an irregular heartbeat, swollen throat, itching, and difficulty in breathing. Triggers for anaphylaxis include latex, foods, insect venoms, certain medications, etc. Other conditions that can cause hypotension include reaction to alcohol, heat exhaustion or heat stroke, damaged nervous system, and liver disease. Certain over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications for conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, Parkinson's disease, and erectile dysfunction can also lead to an instant fall in blood pressure levels. Treatment of hypotension usually depends on the underlying cause. Depending on factors such as age, health, and the type of hypotension, treatment may involve medications for conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, or infection. For orthostatic hypotension, a physician may prescribe drugs such as fludrocortisone or midodrine. In most cases, hypotension can be managed naturally. Some of the measures that help include: Follow a balanced diet that includes fewer carbohydrates Increase the intake of salt Drink more water Avoid consumption of alcohol Become physically active Get up slowly from a seat or bed after sitting or lying down Avoid crossing legs while sitting Avoid standing still for longer periods of time Wear compression stockings Conclusion It is possible to manage and prevent hypotension by understanding the root cause and taking preventive measures. It is also equally important to know and avoid the individual-specific triggers. People who are already taking medications for low blood pressure should follow the prescription shared by the physician to avoid the risk of harmful complications. Talk to a cardiologist if you have any questions related to heart health. References: Hypotension, or low blood pressure, means that the pressure of blood circulating around the body is lower than normal or lower than expected.Low blood pressure is only a problem if it has a negative impact on the body and produces symptoms.Some causes of hypotension include blood loss, dehydration and certain medications, such as antihypertensive drugs. The heart pumps blood around the body through the blood vessels. Blood pressure is the amount of force exerted on the artery walls by the pumping blood. Blood pressure varies according to environmental demands. For example, it rises during physical exertion and drops in extreme heat. Hypotension, or low blood pressure, means that the pressure of blood circulating around the body is lower than normal, or lower than expected given the environmental conditions. However, 'hypotension' is a relative term – one person may have low blood pressure compared to others of similar physical characteristics, but may be perfectly healthy. Low blood pressure is only a problem if it has a negative impact on the body. For example, vital organs (particularly the brain) may be starved of oxygen and nutrients if the blood pressure is too low for that particular person. Symptoms of hypotension Substantial blood loss can cause a sudden drop in blood pressure (shock). The most dramatic symptom of sudden hypotension is unconsciousness. Usually, low blood pressure develops over time. Symptoms include: Light-headedness, when standing from a sitting or lying position Unsteadiness Dizziness Weakness Blurred vision Fatigue Fainting. Causes of hypotension Blood pressure is measured using a device known as a sphygmomanometer. If the measurement drops 30mmHg below the person's usual blood pressure, this is considered to be hypotension. Low blood pressure has many different causes including: Emotional stress, fear, insecurity or pain (the most common causes of fainting) Dehydration, which reduces blood volume The body's reaction to heat, which is to shunt blood into the vessels of the skin, leading to dehydration Blood donation Internal bleeding, such as a perforated stomach ulcer Blood loss from trauma, such as a road accident or deep cut Pregnancy Medications for high blood pressure Diuretics, which produce fluid loss Medications for depression Medications for certain heart conditions Allergic reaction to certain drugs or chemicals Some forms of infection, such as toxic shock syndrome Heart disease, which can hamper the pumping action of the heart muscle Some nervous system disorders, such as Parkinson's disease Addison's disease (where the adrenal glands fail to produce sufficient blood-pressure-maintaining hormones). Orthostatic hypotension Generally, when you stand upright from a sitting or lying position, the blood vessels in your body respond to gravity by constricting. This increases blood pressure. Orthostatic hypotension means that the blood vessels don't adjust to a standing position and, instead, allow the blood pressure to drop, resulting in a feeling of light-headedness. Causes include: Nervous system diseases, such as neuropathy Prolonged bed rest Dehydration Irregular heart beat (heart arrhythmia). Treatment for hypotension Treatment depends on the cause. For example, the dosages of existing medications may need to be altered or a bleeding stomach ulcer surgically repaired. If no particular cause can be found, drugs may be used to raise blood pressure. In extreme cases, a lower body pressure suit may be required. Where to get help Things to remember Hypotension, or low blood pressure, means that the pressure of blood circulating around the body is lower than normal or lower than expected. Low blood pressure is only a problem if it has negative impact on the body and produces symptoms. Some causes of hypotension include blood loss, dehydration and certain medications, such as antihypertensive drugs. This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website. As blood is pumped by the heart around the body, the pressure with which it pushes against the walls of blood vessels changes.When the heart is squeezing blood into the arteries, the pressure is high. When the heart is relaxed, the pressure is lower. Your blood pressure is a measurement taken of the highest reading and the lowest reading. It is given as 2 figures — highest over lowest. Blood pressure is measured in 'mmHg', which refers to millimetres of mercury. What is low blood pressure? Low blood pressure is also known as hypotension. Most doctors would say that you have low blood pressure if it is below 90/60 mmHg. Your doctor will refer to this as '90 over 60'. Is low blood pressure a problem? For some people, low blood pressure is a sign of good health. These are generally people who are very fit and who have a slow pulse. For other people, low blood pressure is a problem. Often, people with low blood pressure can be expected to lead longer lives. However, people who experience continuing symptoms of low blood pressure should see a doctor. Sudden, severe low blood pressure (shock) can be associated with serious medical conditions. What are the signs and symptoms of low blood pressure? The symptoms of low blood pressure may include: These symptoms can occur when doing nothing. They are more likely to occur when changing position, such as standing up or when straining on the toilet. However, often there are no symptoms and low blood pressure is often only identified as a result of a routine medical examination or during the course of an investigation for some other condition or underlying illness. Low blood pressure may be more serious in elderly people who may have an underlying illness or who may be at risk of a fall. Check your symptoms with healthdirect's Symptom Checker to get advice on when to seek medical attention. What causes low blood pressure? Apart from being very fit, people can have low blood pressure if they: are overheated, either from the weather, from hot baths or showers, or from wearing too many clothes have too little blood circulating, either from donating blood, from bleeding heavily, or from being dehydrated are pregnant are taking one of many different types of medicines have a lot of drugs or alcohol in the system People can also have low blood pressure due to medical conditions, such as if they: There is also a particular type of low blood pressure called 'postural hypotension' or 'orthostatic hypotension'. In this condition, a person's blood pressure is normal when they are sitting or lying down, but it drops suddenly when they stand, making them feel dizzy or lightheaded. This can also occur when standing too long without moving. Postural hypotension is fairly common, particularly in older people. It can be caused by one of the situations or conditions listed above. If it happens often, or if it causes problems, you should see your doctor about it. When should I see a doctor? If you think you might have symptoms of low blood pressure listed above, it's best to see your doctor. How is low blood pressure treated? If there is an underlying cause for your low blood pressure, and it is giving you problems, you may need treatment for that underlying cause. But if it isn't causing you problems, treatment won't be needed. Your doctor may advise you to take precautions to prevent episodes of low blood pressure, such as avoiding dehydration, hot showers or standing up too quickly.Last reviewed: August 2020

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