



Cold Hands and Raynaud's Phenomenon

Many people develop cold fingers and toes in cool weather. In some people this can be more severe and is called Raynaud's phenomenon. (It is named after the man who first described it). A typical description of Raynaud's phenomenon is as follows.

- ◆ At first the fingers and/or toes go white and cool. This is due to the small blood vessels narrowing and constricting (going into spasm).
- ◆ They then go a bluish colour. This is due to the oxygen being used up from the reduced blood supply of the narrowed blood vessels.
- ◆ They then going bright red. This is due to the blood vessels opening up again and the return of the blood flow. This may cause tingling, throbbing and can be painful.

The tips of the earlobes, nose and tongue may also be affected. The duration of episodes varies from minutes to hours. The amount of pain or discomfort varies too between affected people. Many people do not have the full classic colour changes but still develop bouts of uncomfortable, pale, cold fingers and toes. Women are affected nine times more often than men. It tends to run in some families.

What causes Raynaud's phenomenon?

Cause unknown - primary Raynauds

The cause of Raynaud's phenomenon is not known in more than 9 in 10 affected people. These people have no other associated symptoms or problems. The small blood vessels in the fingers, toes, etc, are more sensitive to cool temperatures than usual. It is not clear why this occurs. Even mildly cool situations can trigger symptoms in some people.

Cause known - secondary Raynauds

A cause can be found in less than 1 in 10 affected people. Raynaud's phenomenon is sometimes just one part of another condition. A variety of conditions affecting blood vessels, joints or skin can include Raynaud's phenomenon. In such people, other symptoms usually also occur such as joint pains, rashes, joint swelling, etc. Another cause is due to vibrating tools. Some people who have used vibrating tools regularly for a number of years develop a condition called 'Vibration White Finger'. This is like a severe form of Raynaud's phenomenon. Emotional stress may also trigger symptoms in some people.

What can I do to help?

- ◆ *Smoking* - may make symptoms much worse. The chemicals in tobacco can cause the small blood vessels to constrict (narrow). Stopping smoking will often ease symptoms and may even cure the problem.
- ◆ *Medication* - some medicines used to treat other conditions sometimes make symptoms worse. They may have a side effect of causing blood vessels to narrow. Such medicines include beta-blockers (for example, propranolol), some anti migraine medicines and, very occasionally, the contraceptive pill. Don't stop prescribed medication suddenly if you suspect it may be making symptoms worse. See your doctor to discuss possible alternatives.
- ◆ *Keep warm* - in particular, warm gloves, socks and shoes are essential when out in cool weather. Putting the gloves on when warm, before going into colder areas, works best. Padding in shoes can also help. In people with severe symptoms, portable heat packs, battery heated gloves and socks are useful. The Raynaud's and Scleroderma Association have a list of suppliers - see below for their details.
- ◆ *Avoid changes in temperature whenever possible* - and try not to touch cold objects.

What are the treatments for Raynaud's Phenomenon?

Most people with Raynaud's phenomenon manage with the above suggestions. Medication may be needed if symptoms are severe. Medication works by 'opening up' (dilating) the blood vessels. Nifedipine is the commonest medicine used.

Other medicines may be tried if this is not helpful. Some people take medication just in winter or during cold weather spells.

The minority of people with Raynaud's phenomenon due to an underlying condition may also be advised on other treatments for their condition.

Stress counselling may be helpful for some people who develop symptoms when stressed or emotional.

Further information and help

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