Fact Sheet

Poor Circulation

What is Poor Circulation?

Peripheral vascular disease is the medical name given to a group of problems causing poor circulation to the feet and legs. The most common cause of this is atherosclerosis ("hardening of the arteries") in which there is a gradual thickening and hardening of the walls of the arteries (the blood vessels that bring blood to the extremities from the heart). Diabetes is the most common cause of peripheral vascular disease.

Symptoms

The symptoms experienced can depend on which artery is affected and how much the blood flow is reduced. Some symptoms include:

- Claudication (this is a dull cramping pain in the calf muscle that comes on after walking a certain distance - it is relieved by rest).
- Numbness or tingling in the foot or toes can occur.
- Changes in the colour of the skin (it becomes more pale, bluish, or reddish).
- Changes in the skin temperature (the foot becomes cooler).
- Skin breakdowns, infection and sores do not heal as well as they should.

Causes

Poor circulation is most commonly caused by a progressive blocking of the arteries in the leg (atherosclerosis). Those with diabetes are more likely to develop poor circulation to the foot. Other risk factors for developing poor circulation include a lack of physical activity, smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

The biggest effect of poor circulation on the foot, is that its problems (such as sores, infections, cuts etc.) that develop, do not heal as well as they should. In many cases they do not heal at all without special care. The reason for this is that the blood carries vital elements (eg. oxygen) that the body's tissues need for vitality and healing.

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Podiatric Treatment

Podiatric management of those with peripheral vascular disease (poor circulation) should include:

- A complete evaluation and assessment of the circulation status of the foot and communication on the level of risk of complications developing.
- Periodic reassessments of this status.
- Advice on foot care and fitting footwear.
- Care of toenails, corns, calluses and other foot conditions.
- Management of any wounds, sores or infections that may develop as a result.

Surgical Treatment

Poor circulation can be treated by your doctor or vascular surgeon in a number of ways:

- Good control of the blood glucose level is important if diabetes is present.
- Other risk factors such as lack of exercise; high blood pressure; smoking; and high cholesterol levels also need to be addressed.
- Drugs can be used to prevent the blood clotting (antiplatelet agents and anticoagulants).
- Angioplasty can be used to enlarge the narrowed peripheral arteries.
- A vein from another part of the body can be used to bypass the narrow or blocked artery by the vascular surgeon.

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Self Management (Foot care)

As the healing from skin break downs, sores and cuts on the foot occur and therefore extra special care is needed to prevent problems from developing.

There is a lot you can do to help yourself if you have poor circulation. Follow your doctor's advice about exercise and take advice from a podiatrist about foot care and footwear fitting. Self care includes:

- Preventing trauma and accidents (eg. wearing shoes to prevent trauma).
- Wearing footwear that is well fitted and not causing any pressure areas.
- Seeking professional help from a podiatrist for the cutting of toe nails.
- Corns and calluses need treatment. If they progress without treatment, the skin may break down and sores may develop beneath them and prove difficult to heal.

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