NHS
Royal Berkshire
NHS Foundation Trust

Intermittent claudication

This leaflet tells you how to prevent and to manage symptoms caused by intermittent claudication – leg pain caused by hardening of the arteries.

What is intermittent claudication?

The pain you feel in your legs is called intermittent claudication. The reason for this is a narrowing or blockage in the main artery taking blood down to your leg. This is due to hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis).

Over the years, calcium and cholesterol build up inside the arteries. This occurs much earlier in people who smoke and those who have diabetes or high levels of cholesterol in the blood.

What does this mean?

It is a warning sign that your arteries are becoming blocked. The blockage or narrowing causes the blood supply to be reduced. The circulation is sufficient when you are resting but when walking the calf muscle cannot obtain enough blood and cramp occurs. This is made better by resting for a few minutes. If greater demands are made on the muscles, such as walking uphill, the pain comes on more quickly. If you suffer with pain at rest then you must tell your doctor as this may mean that your disease has worsened.

Does the blockage ever clear itself?

No, unfortunately not, but the situation may improve due to opening up the smaller arteries (collateral circulation) which carry blood around the blockage. Many people notice some improvement as the collateral circulation opens up within six to eight weeks of the onset of claudication.

How can I do this?

There are several things you can do that may help. The most important is to **stop smoking**, **take regular exercise** and **lose weight** if you need to.

Smoking

If you are a smoker, you must make a determined effort to give up completely. Tobacco is harmful on two counts. Firstly, it speeds up the hardening of the arteries, which is the basic cause of the trouble. Secondly, cigarette smoke clamps down the smaller arteries and reduces the amount of blood and oxygen to the muscles. The best way to give up is to choose a day when you are going to stop completely rather than trying to cut down gradually. If you do have trouble giving up please ask your doctor who can give you advice on nicotine gum and patches or put you in touch with a support group such as smoking cessation.

Diet

It is very important not to put on weight because the more weight the legs have to carry around, the more blood they will need. Your doctor or dietician will give you advice with regard to a weight reducing diet. If your blood cholesterol is high, you will need a low fat diet and may also require cholesterol lowering tablets.

Exercise

There is good evidence that people who take regular exercise develop a better circulation. By walking at an easy pace until pain comes on then stopping and continuing again once the pain disappears. Try to walk a little further each day and you will almost certainly find that the distance you can manage without pain slowly but steadily increases.

Medicines

There are a few medicines on the market to help the disease progressing but drugs will not unblock an artery. Aspirin is commonly prescribed because it makes the blood less sticky to help it flow easier. Statins can help stop the deposit of calcium and plaque in the arteries, and management of high blood pressure will also help.

What about treatment?

Most people with intermittent claudication do not require surgery but if your symptoms are severe or if they do not improve, further treatment may be necessary.

What is the risk of losing my leg?

Very few patients with intermittent claudication end up with an amputation ***if they stop smoking***. The most important thing is that you improve your lifestyle. Remember keep walking, lose weight and stop smoking.

Useful contacts

Vascular Clinical Nurse Specialists, Tiina Winson and Ioanna Valera, 0118 322 8627.
Surgery Clinical Admin Team (CAT3), Royal Berkshire Hospital 0118 322 6890.
Smokefree NHS www.nhs.uk/smokefree.
Smokefreelife Berkshire www.smokefreelifeberkshire.com/ 0800 622 6360

Useful website addresses

www.circulationfoundation.org.uk
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/peripheral-arterial-disease-pad/

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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