

Raynaud's in Teenagers and Youngsters

WHAT IS RAYNAUD'S?

Raynaud's is a common condition in which the blood supply to the fingers and toes and sometimes the ears and nose, is temporarily slowed down because the blood vessels go into spasm, and restrict the flow of blood. Symptoms are usually worse in winter due to exposure to the cold but an attack can be caused by just a slight change in temperature. This means that even in summer you may still experience problems. An attack is when the hands take on a white, waxy like appearance, feel dead and useless. They may then turn blue/purple in colour and finally red when the blood starts to flow back. This final stage may be accompanied by a burning feeling, considerable pain or numbness.

You
are not
alone

Anyone of any age can develop Raynaud's which affects millions of people. It is not an 'old persons condition' as many affected are teenagers. The reason for this is not known but it is thought to be connected in some way to hormonal changes in puberty. Fortunately, when teenagers develop Raynaud's it is usually a fairly mild form and in most cases, disappears during the early twenties. However, in a small number of cases the condition does persist.

Raynaud's should be taken seriously as problems experienced during these years can be more than just a nuisance. It can be painful, embarrassing and restrict your lifestyle. It can be difficult to explain to friends why you can't always join in. As a result, the temptation is to opt out and this could make you feel worse. Many teenagers still enjoy a wide range of activities such as horse riding, cycling, swimming and even skiing, just by taking a few simple precautions. Exercise in the right environment should be encouraged.

AT SCHOOL

It can be very distressing to feel that you are on your own, but if you take the time and trouble to explain to your teachers and friends it will help them to understand. Take one of our leaflets and a letter from your doctor to senior tutors and your school nurse, so that they know about and can support you with your condition.

Permission may be needed to stay indoors at break times in very cold or windy weather. However, don't use your Raynaud's as an excuse not to exercise. Your P.E. teacher will have heard all the excuses for not doing games before and if you have not explained about your Raynaud's, then he or she is unlikely to be sympathetic. Make your problems known, ask to wear extra layers - tights or track suit bottoms and gloves, two pairs of socks and larger trainers for physical education. Don't suffer in silence!

If your Raynaud's is too severe for outdoor activities, consider alternatives and find an indoor hobby you can become involved with.

Take care

- Cookery, metalwork, physics and chemistry teachers must also be made aware of your condition.
- When your hands are cold and numb, you may not be able to tell the difference between hot and cold surfaces. Watch out - don't burn yourself!
- Loss of grip, for example on a metal climbing frame, could result in an accident.
- Use warm not hot water to rewarm your hands.
- Warm air hand dryers in public places are effective for warming the hands.

TREATMENTS

A doctor may prescribe drugs called vasodilators if your condition gets worse. There are many drugs in this category which work by opening up or relaxing the blood vessels. It is important for you to understand your own problems and to work out ways of coping with them. If you have a mild form of Raynaud's, your doctor may suggest that you simply wear warm clothing, protect yourself from the cold and avoid changes in temperature rather than taking drugs.

YOUNG CHILDREN

Unlike teenage Raynaud's it is quite rare for a young child or baby to have Raynaud's. If symptoms do occur, the doctor will probably look for an underlying disorder and make a referral to a paediatrician. Raynaud's can appear with no apparent cause and parents have to cope with a child who is too young to communicate what is wrong. It is difficult for a youngster to understand that they have to keep warm in order to lessen the pain which they may be experiencing in their hands and/or feet.

Take care when bathing a young child. Temperatures which may feel acceptable to you may be too hot and painful. It is better to half fill a bath with luke warm water and gradually top it up as their body gets used to the temperature. A warm bath on going to bed can help to heat the whole body through and warming the bed will also help to keep the body at a steady temperature.

Try to keep the house at an even temperature and before going out, warm the clothing, especially gloves, scarves, socks, shoes etc. A child will soon come to realise that warmth is comfortable and cold is not. It is important to educate your child to cope in the best way possible, as this condition may be with them throughout their school days. There is usually a solution and staff at school will understand if you talk to them about it.

WORK AROUND YOUR RAYNAUD'S AND DON'T GIVE IN TO IT!

There are ways of staying fashionable and warm by wearing several thin layers of clothes rather than one thick layer. Use some of the ideas below - you may start a fashion trend!

- Baggy clothes can conceal more layers.
- Try not to buy clothes with lots of tiny, fiddly fasteners - cold hands find these very difficult to cope with.
- Thermal underwear does not necessarily mean old fashioned long-johns and vests. There are now very attractive thermal clothes which cover your trunk, or just wear a T-Shirt under your school shirt.
- For girls, wear flesh-coloured nylon tights and socks.
- Tights under trousers can help to keep you warm without looking too wrapped up.
- Jackets - the longer the better - preferably at least to the top of your legs and windproof if possible.
- Try a hat - Hats can be very fashionable and really do save heat loss from the head.
- Wear a scarf around your neck.
- Boots cover the ankles and so avoid a cold gap and wrist warmers may also help to bridge the gap between jacket and gloves.
- Put your shoes and clothes in the airing cupboard overnight or place on, or near a radiator to make getting dressed the next morning much easier.
- Keep your hands warm. There are a wide variety of gloves and mittens which have space for handwarmers.

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