

Circulatory Problems: Pay Attention to the Symptoms

A blood clot in your heart's arteries can cause a heart attack, and a blood clot in your brain can cause a stroke.

But did you know that clots or blockages that affect your circulation can occur in any part of your body and lead to serious health problems? Some blockages can even lead to the loss of a limb.

"Your circulatory system acts as the plumbing for your body. It delivers blood with oxygen to every tissue and every organ. And it carries away all your body's wastes," says [Dr. Stefan K nel-Pierre](#), a vascular surgeon with the University of Miami Health System. "When you have problems with your circulation, we vascular specialists act like plumbers to fix the piping, the arteries, and veins."

Poor circulation can announce itself in many ways.

"People don't really talk much about vascular health, and patients often have symptoms like pain that occurs with walking, which they ignore for way too long," says Dr. K nel-Pierre. "If you smoke, or have poorly controlled cholesterol, or hardly ever exercise, small problems with your circulation can take hold and become big problems," he says.

If you have any of the following symptoms, see a medical professional promptly. Don't wait for the problems to become intense. And don't dismiss these symptoms as a normal part of aging:

- Numbness and tingling, or the feeling of pins and needles, in your hands or

feet. Cold hands and feet may also indicate poor circulation.

- Pain when walking. Dr. K nel-Pierre has seen many patients who began to have trouble walking distances that they had once been able to manage but put off seeking care. “They would just sit down and rest awhile before continuing to walk,” he says. “Some of those people were on their way to serious arterial disease in their legs. By postponing care and continually participating in unhealthy behaviors, they can put themselves at risk of amputation.”
- Swollen legs, ankles, or feet. This can also be a sign of heart failure.
- Sores or wounds that don’t heal on the legs.
- Varicose veins.
- Changes in the skin color of your nose, lips, ears, nipples, hands, or feet.
- Mental problems, such as confusion or memory problems.
- Digestive problems such as constipation, cramping, belly pain, diarrhea, or blood in the stools.

What causes circulatory problems?

Many common diseases are contributors to circulatory problems. “Patients often don’t know about the strong connections between conditions that they have and vascular problems,” says Dr. K nel-Pierre. Here are some of the problems involved:

- Atherosclerosis: This buildup of plaque in the arteries often occurs in smokers, people with high cholesterol levels, or high blood pressure.
- Diabetes. If you have diabetes, the better you control your blood sugar, the less likely you are to have circulatory problems because of the illness. “Diabetes is a leading cause of amputations of toes, feet, and lower legs. And the numbers of these amputations have been increasing among young adults in recent years,” says Dr. K nel-Pierre.

- Being overweight.
- Smoking. Smoking uniquely elevates the risk of circulatory diseases in African-Americans.
- Having Raynaud's disease or phenomenon.

Healthy habits help ward off vascular issues

All the healthy habits that protect you from heart disease can also preserve the health of your entire circulatory system:

- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Whatever you weigh, eat a healthy diet.

Go heavy on vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and low-fat sources of protein. These include beans, fish, and lean poultry.

Reduce red meat consumption to one or two times a week. Cut way down or eliminate processed meats, ones which are salted, smoked, or cured.

Enjoy these five kinds of foods, which mainly support the health of your vascular system:

- Salmon. Also, anchovies, herring, and sardines. These fish are all high in Omega 3 fatty acids
 - Olive oil
 - Oats, especially steel cut oats
 - Dark leafy greens, such as spinach, kale, and collards
 - Blueberries
- Move! With exercise, your heart grows stronger so it can better pump blood all through your body. Also, as your muscles contract and relax, they squeeze the large veins in your limbs. This boosts circulation too.

Seek care sooner rather than later

Patients often come in with terrible leg pain and don't know why, says Dr. K nel-Pierre. "They just don't realize how their risk factors have set the stage for their problems," he says. "A patient may be 65 years old and smoke two packs a day but not realize how those facts are related to the painful charley horse feeling they have in their legs."

For years, people have heard a lot about cardiovascular health. By now, most people know that smoking damages the heart and lungs. "Most patients don't realize that there are links between the problems caused by smoking to the heart and lungs and problems with circulation that can cause pain in the legs," says Dr. K nel-Pierre.



"They haven't heard the term 'peripheral artery disease,' even though it's such a common condition," he says. One in every 20 Americans over the age of 50 has peripheral artery disease (PAD). It involves the narrowing of arteries that reduce blood flow to the limbs. If caught early, the symptoms can be managed, and the condition can even be reversed.

How is a vascular disease diagnosed?

To determine the cause of your symptoms and choose the best treatment, your healthcare provider may use various blood tests. They may send you for imaging tests, such as an ultrasound or a CT scan, which can examine your blood vessels and identify clots.

To diagnose peripheral artery disease, you may undergo an ankle-brachial index

test. This is a simple procedure that compares the blood pressure in your upper and lower limbs. It's no more complicated than having your blood pressure taken.

If you put off seeking care for too long, the needed treatments may be complicated and taxing.

If not caught early, you may need surgery.

With really severe problems, you may need an amputation.

But if vascular problems are caught early, they may prove manageable with shifts in lifestyle. Your health care provider may suggest that you lose weight, exercise more, and wear compression stockings.

Milly Dawson is a contributor to UMiami Health News.

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