How to improve poor circulation in the feet

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Poor circulation in the feet can cause the feet to become cold, discolored, or numb. Sometimes, it is a symptom of an underlying condition.

The body transports blood, oxygen, and nutrients to cells around the body through the circulatory system. If blood vessels in an area close, harden, or narrow, a person may develop reduced circulation.

In this article, we will look at the symptoms of poor circulation in the feet, potential causes, treatments, and self-care techniques.

Signs and symptoms

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People with poor circulation may notice their feet feel cold or numb. They may also notice discoloration. The feet may turn red, blue, purple, or white.

These symptoms may worsen in certain situations, such as when a person sits still for long periods of time or goes outside in cold weather. However, for some people, these symptoms may be constant or flare up due to an underlying condition.

Additional symptoms of poor circulation can include:

dry or cracked skin
hair loss on the legs or feet
weak toenails
slow wound healing

Underlying causes

Below are some of the underlying conditions that may cause reduced circulation.

Raynaud's disease
Raynaud's disease syndrome causes blood vessels to narrow when someone is cold or, sometimes, when stressed. This limits the amount of blood flowing to the fingers and toes. RarelyTrusted Source , it may affect the nose, ears, nipples, and lips.

The symptoms include:

fingers or toes turning white or blue
cold extremities
pain
numbness
tingling
a burning sensation

These symptoms can last as little as 1 minute or as long as several hours.

Most people with Raynaud's disease have the primary form of the condition. Some people have secondary Raynaud's, which occurs as a result of another illness. Secondary Raynaud's tends to be more severe.

There is no cure for Raynaud's, but it is possible to reduce the symptoms and potentially reduce the frequency of attacks with the help of medical treatment and lifestyle changes.

Acrocyanosis
Acrocyanosis is a condition that causes the extremities, such as the toes, to turn blue. This occurs when the blood vessels constrict, preventing blood flow and oxygen from moving through that part of the body.

It is a similar condition to Raynaud's phenomenon, but scientists understand it much less than they do Raynaud's. The main symptoms include:

blue-tinged fingers or toes
cold, clammy skin
swelling
a normal pulse

As with Raynaud's, there are two types of acrocyanosis: primary and secondary. Primary acrocyanosis occurs on its own and typically affects both sides of the body, for example, both feet. Scientists are not sure what causes it or how

best to treat it.

Secondary acrocyanosis often affects only one side of the body and can be a result of many conditions, including eating disorders, blood disorders, and genetic conditions.

Diabetes
If a person has diabetes, they are at riskTrusted Source of their blood vessels becoming damaged. This may happen if they experience high blood glucose levels for extended periods of time.

If a person with diabetes does not receive any treatment, they could develop reduced circulation in the feet, as well as foot ulcers that do not heal.

Managing diabetes effectively can help prevent foot problems. People with diabetes should receive an annual foot examination to make sure that they have not developed poor circulation, ulcers, or neuropathy.

Arteriosclerosis
If a person's blood pressure is too high, it can causeTrusted Source arteriosclerosis. This occurs when the arteries harden, and blood cannot travel through them easily.

Some people who have arteriosclerosis do not exhibit any symptoms, while others may develop some. The symptoms vary depending on which arteries the condition has affected, and they may include:

pressure in the chest
shortness of breath
irregular heartbeat
weakness
problems with breathing
confusion
dizziness

Treatment for arteriosclerosis may include medication, such as medicine to control a person's cholesterol, or possibly surgery to open blocked arteries or remove plaque buildup.

Peripheral artery disease
If left untreated, arteriosclerosis can turn into peripheral artery disease (PAD). PAD occurs when plaque builds up in arteries. This can reduce or even stopTrusted Source blood flow, resulting in tissue death and potentially amputation.

Symptoms may include:

leg pain
weakness in the legs
leg cramping
toenails not growing
a pale or blue foot

Prescription medication can improve symptoms in people with reduced circulation. In more severe cases, a person may require surgery.

Risk factors

Factors that can increase the likelihood of low circulation include:

physical inactivity
smoking
high cholesterol
high blood pressure

Smoking can reduce blood flow by affecting a person's cardiovascular system. It raisesTrusted Source the risk of arteriosclerosis and PAD.

Additionally, smoking is a risk factor for a form of vasculitis known as Buerger's disease, which can cause severe Raynaud's. In some cases, Buerger's can cause gangrene.

Caffeine, alcohol, and stress can also constrict blood vessels, causing or worsening circulation problems. Certain sitting positions may also reduce blood flow, according to a 2015 studyTrusted Source .

Diagnosis

A doctor can diagnose circulation problems and any underlying issues that may be causing them. They may ask about a person's medical history, as well as their symptoms and when they occur.

Doctors may diagnose Raynaud's or acrocyanosis based on symptoms and a physical examination. They may alsoTrusted Source try cold stimulation to observe the body's response, or a nailfold capillaroscopy, which can detect diseases associated with secondary Raynaud's.

Doctors diagnose PAD via a physical examination and by comparing the blood pressure in a person's arm versus their ankle. They can diagnose diabetes using a blood sugar or urine test.

How to improve circulation at home

The best way to improve circulation in the feet is to treat any underlying conditions that may be causing it. If doctors cannot pinpoint a cause, however, a number of self-care strategies may help.

People can try:

Moving more: A 2020 studyTrusted Source found that performing simple leg stretches can help improve vascular function after 12 weeks. The stretching regime made arteries less stiff, which helped them dilate. If sitting for a long period of time, set reminders to get up and move around.
Massage: Massaging the feet can stimulate circulation. People with Raynaud's may also find that it helpsTrusted Source prevent or shorten attacks.
Relaxation techniques: Breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, and tai chi can help with managing unavoidable stress.

Avoiding caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol: Caffeine and alcohol can constrict blood vessels and exacerbate Raynaud's. Smoking increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.
Wearing compression socks: Compression socks apply pressure to the legs and feet, forcing blood to travel back toward the heart.
Staying warm: If circulation problems get worse in cold conditions, keep the home at a comfortable temperature and wrap up in layers. Use hand or foot warmers when needed.

When to contact a doctor

Anyone experiencing persistent circulation problems in the feet should speak with a doctor. Sometimes, this is a symptom of an underlying condition that requires treatment.

A person should call 911 or contact the local emergency department if they experience:

swelling in one or both limbs
pain that begins at the calf in the affected limb
warmth
skin discoloration

These symptoms can indicate deep vein thrombosis, which can be life threatening.

Summary

Poor circulation can occur for many reasons. Sometimes, it is due to a disease that requires treatment. However, it can also occur on its own, as a result of a condition such as primary Raynaud's.

Staying warm and active, wearing compression socks, and managing stress may help people relieve the symptoms of poor circulation in the feet. However, it is important to seek guidance from a doctor so that they can rule out underlying conditions.