

Intermittent Claudication

Information and advice for patients

Vascular

What is intermittent claudication?

Intermittent claudication is muscle pain which is brought on by exercise and relieved by rest. It is most commonly felt in the lower leg muscle (calf) but can also occur in the thigh, hip or buttock.

What causes intermittent claudication?

Intermittent claudication is caused by narrowing or a blockage in the artery which takes blood to your leg, so that when you walk your muscles can't get enough blood. The blockage is usually caused by atherosclerosis but can also be caused by a blood clot. Atherosclerosis is where deposits of fatty substances, such as cholesterol, build up inside the artery causing it to harden and narrow.

About 1 in 10 people over 70 years of age have intermittent claudication and it is more common in men, people who smoke and those who have diabetes, high blood pressure or high levels of cholesterol in their blood.

What are the symptoms of intermittent claudication?

The symptom of intermittent claudication is an aching or cramping pain in the muscles in your leg when you walk, which is then relieved within a few minutes by rest.

How is intermittent claudication diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose intermittent claudication from your symptoms, examining you and carrying out the following tests:

- Blood tests to check the level of cholesterol in your blood, how well your kidneys and thyroid gland are working and to check for diabetes.
- A doppler test to measure the blood pressure in the arteries in your legs. This involves a blood pressure cuff being inflated around your ankle and a sensor/probe will be placed over your leg so the doctor can hear the blood flow.
- An ultrasound scan of your arteries to check where the blockages are and to look for any narrowing or stretching of the arteries.

How is intermittent claudication treated?

You will be given a prescription for aspirin and a statin medication to treat your intermittent claudication.

You will also need to help yourself by:

- Stopping smoking
- Taking regular exercise
- Eating healthily

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What are the benefits of the treatment?

The benefit of taking aspirin is that it helps to prevent blood clots which are more likely to occur when the arteries are narrowed and have fatty deposits inside them. Blood clots can lead to serious complications.

The benefit of taking statins is that they reduce the amount of cholesterol in your blood. This prevents your arteries from becoming narrowed or blocked further by fatty deposits.

What are the risks of the treatment?

The risks of taking aspirin are that it can cause stomach irritation, indigestion and bleeding in the stomach. To prevent this from occurring aspirin should be taken with food.

The risks of taking statins are that they can cause headache, pins and needles, stomach pain, bloating, diarrhoea, feeling sick, a rash and rarely a severe form of muscle inflammation.

A full list of possible side effects can be found in the manufacturer's leaflet that comes with your medication; please read this before taking it.

What are the risks of not getting treatment?

If you do not have treatment for intermittent claudication it could become worse, meaning that you experience more pain in your leg, more often. You will also have a higher risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

If your intermittent claudication is more severe, an alternative treatment may be a procedure to widen the artery (angioplasty) or surgery to bypass the blockage so the blood can flow to the areas which need it via a different route. If you need one of these procedures you will be given a further information leaflet explaining it.

How can I help myself?

Give up smoking

If you are a smoker it is essential that you give up as soon as possible because smoking speeds up the hardening of the arteries and prevents the smaller arteries from getting bigger to improve the blood supply. It also reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood which your body tissues need to function properly.

Exercise regularly

Regular exercise can help you to increase the distance you can walk without pain and also improve your general fitness. Try to set yourself a distance to walk each day. Your vascular nurse may also recommend that you attend a cardiovascular rehabilitation programme of supervised exercise and education.

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Eat healthily

It is important to reduce the amount of fatty foods in your diet as these contain cholesterol which causes your arteries to become narrowed by building up inside them. For more information about eating healthily visit the NHS Choices website or speak to your GP.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about your condition please contact:

Vascular Nurses

0121 507 5909

Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm

Further information

For help giving up smoking:

NHS Smokefree

0800 022 4 332

Monday – Friday, 9am – 8pm

Saturday & Sunday, 11am – 4pm

www.smokefree.nhs.uk

For more information about eating healthily:

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthy-eating

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk and www.swbhengage.com, follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

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Sources used for the information in this leaflet

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, CG147 'Lower limb peripheral arterial disease: Diagnosis and management', August 2012

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5420 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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