

# What Is Raynaud's Phenomenon?

## *Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public*

Raynaud's phenomenon is a disorder that affects blood vessels, mostly in the fingers and toes. It causes the blood vessels to narrow when you are:

- Cold
- Feeling stress.

*Primary* Raynaud's phenomenon happens on its own. *Secondary* Raynaud's phenomenon happens along with some other health problem.

### **Who Gets Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

People of all ages can have Raynaud's phenomenon. Raynaud's phenomenon may run in families, but more research is needed.

The primary form is the most common. It most often starts between age 15 and 25. It is most common in:

- Women
- People living in cold places.

The secondary form tends to start after age 35 to 40. It is most common in people with connective tissue diseases, such as scleroderma, Sjögren's syndrome, and lupus. Other possible causes include:

- Carpal tunnel syndrome, which affects nerves in the wrists
- Blood vessel disease
- Some medicines used to treat high blood pressure, migraines, or cancer
- Some over-the-counter cold medicines
- Some narcotics.

People with certain jobs may be more likely to get the secondary form:

- Workers who are around certain chemicals
- People who use tools that vibrate, such as a jackhammer.

### **What Are the Symptoms of Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

The body saves heat when it is cold by slowing the supply of blood to the skin. It does this by making blood vessels more narrow.

With Raynaud's phenomenon, the body's reaction to cold or stress is stronger than normal. It makes blood vessels narrow faster and tighter than normal. When this happens, it is called an "attack."

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During an attack, the fingers and toes can change colors. They may go from white to blue to red. They may also feel cold and numb from lack of blood flow. As the attack ends and blood flow returns, fingers or toes can throb and tingle. After the cold parts of the body warm up, normal blood flow returns in about 15 minutes.

### **What Is the Difference Between Primary and Secondary Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

Primary Raynaud's phenomenon is often so mild a person never seeks treatment.

Secondary Raynaud's phenomenon is more serious and complex. It is caused when diseases reduce blood flow to fingers and toes.

### **How Does a Doctor Diagnose Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

It is fairly easy to diagnose Raynaud's phenomenon. But it is harder to find out whether a person has the primary or the secondary form of the disorder.

Doctors will diagnose which form it is using a complete history, an exam, and tests.

Tests may include:

- Blood tests
- Looking at fingernail tissue with a microscope.

### **What Is the Treatment for Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

Treatment aims to:

- Reduce how many attacks you have
- Make attacks less severe
- Prevent tissue damage
- Prevent loss of finger and toe tissue.

Primary Raynaud's phenomenon does not lead to tissue damage, so nondrug treatment is used first. Treatment with medicine is more common with secondary Raynaud's.

Severe cases of Raynaud's can lead to sores or gangrene (tissue death) in the fingers and toes. These cases can be painful and hard to treat. In severe cases that cause skin ulcers and serious tissue damage, surgery may be used.

### **Nondrug Treatments and Self-Help Measures**

To reduce how long and severe attacks are:

- Keep your hands and feet warm and dry.
- Warm your hands and feet with warm water.

- Avoid air conditioning.
- Wear gloves to touch frozen or cold foods.
- Wear many layers of loose clothing and a hat when it's cold.
- Use chemical warmers, such as small heating pouches that can be placed in pockets, mittens, boots, or shoes.
- Talk to your doctor before exercising outside in cold weather.
- Don't smoke.
- Avoid medicines that make symptoms worse.
- Control stress.
- Exercise regularly.

See a doctor if:

- You worry about attacks.
- You have questions about self-care.
- Attacks happen on just one side of your body.
- You have sores or ulcers on your fingers or toes.

### **Treatment With Medications**

People with secondary Raynaud's phenomenon are often treated with:

- Blood pressure medicines
- Medicines that relax blood vessels. One kind can be put on the fingers to heal ulcers.

If blood flow doesn't return and finger loss is a risk, you will need other medicines.

Pregnant woman should not take these medicines. Sometimes Raynaud's phenomenon gets better or goes away when a woman is pregnant.

### **What Research Is Being Conducted to Help People Who Have Raynaud's Phenomenon?**

Current research is being done on:

- New ways to find and treat the problem
- New medicines to improve blood flow
- Supplements and herbal treatments, *but these have been found ineffective in most studies*
- Causes.

### **For More Information About Raynaud's Phenomenon and Other Related Conditions:**

#### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)**

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The information in this publication was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Raynaud's Phenomenon Q&A full-text version, please contact NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit <http://www.niams.nih.gov>.

### **For Your Information**

This publication contains information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this booklet was printed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332, a toll-free call) or visit its Web site at [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).