

Orthostatic Hypotension

What is orthostatic hypotension?

Orthostatic hypotension is a drop in blood pressure that causes too little blood supply to the brain. This may result in dizziness, falls and blackouts. The fall in blood pressure may occur immediately after standing but it may also happen at any time after getting up from a sitting or lying positions. Being placed promptly in the lying down position quickly relieves symptoms in most cases.

What causes orthostatic hypotension?

Sometimes no exact cause can be found but the following may result in orthostatic hypotension -

- Dehydration possibly from diarrhoea and vomiting or from an inadequate fluid intake.
- Some medications
- Damage to the nervous system, for example, Parkinson's disease or diabetes
- Heart conditions, for example, heart failure
- Anaemia
- Prolonged bed rest

How is it diagnosed?

Usually a history is taken which may include several falls for no apparent reason. Blood pressure is taken in the lying, sitting and standing positions to establish if there is a drop in the blood pressure.

How is it treated?

If there is an underlying cause this should be treated first. Sometimes medications may be used to raise the blood pressure. In cases where there is no specific cause, treatment is not always possible however certain precautions can be taken.

What should I do if I feel the symptoms coming on?

As soon as you feel the symptoms -

- **Sit down**
- **Lie flat** if possible and put your **legs in the air**, for example, against a wall
- When you feel well get up slowly; be prepared to sit back down if symptoms re-occur

What else can I do to prevent attacks?

- Avoid suddenly standing from a sitting bending or lying position; take it in stages
- Before getting out of bed perform arm and leg exercises when lying and again when sitting; crossing and uncrossing your legs firmly may also help (blood pressure is lowest in the morning so extra care may need to be taken)
- Avoid prolonged sitting, lying or standing e.g. bus queues; if this is unavoidable clench and unclench your calf muscles to encourage the blood flow.
- Wear high support stockings during the day and remove them before going to bed
- Some people have large drops in blood pressure 1 to 2 hours after meals; smaller and more frequent meals avoid this.
- Drink enough fluids to keep your urine clear throughout the day; try to drink 1 to 2 litres earlier in the day. Avoid excessive alcohol.

Reference: Newcastle Falls and Syncope Clinic Documentation European task force guidelines, European society of cardiology
www.merck.com

If you have any further questions please contact –

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