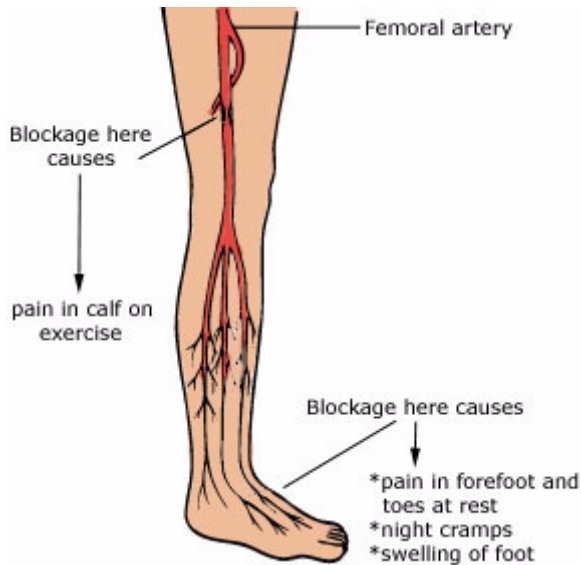


Circulation to legs: poor circulation

Poor circulation to the legs (known as *peripheral vascular disease*) is caused usually by *atherosclerosis* (hardening of the arteries). It is quite common in older people, and the likelihood of it occurring increases with age. It is known to be caused by smoking, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure and diabetes.



What are the symptoms?

Pain in the calves and other muscles

The reduced blood flow to the legs can cause pain, usually in the calves but also in the buttocks and thighs. The pain is a cramping or ache felt only when the legs are active, such as when walking a long distance or running, and it disappears soon after rest. The cramping pain is caused by a lack of oxygen, which is carried to the muscles in the blood.

Pain in the foot

Some patients feel pain in the foot, especially the toes, forefoot and heels. Unlike pain in the muscles, it affects the

skin and comes on at rest. It is generally worse in bed at night, is constant and hard to relieve.

Other symptoms

Other symptoms or signs include loss of normal hair on the legs, shiny skin, nail changes, coldness of the feet and discolouration of the foot (such as red, white or blue).

What aggravates the problem?

Certain drugs, such as beta-blockers (used to treat high blood pressure), smoking and anaemia aggravate this condition.

What are the risks?

The legs are subject to thrombosis, infections, wounds that do not heal (may develop into ulcers) and gangrene.

What tests are done?

There are special investigations to measure the blood flow to your legs. If surgery is being considered, an X-ray of the arteries will be arranged.

What can be done?

The most important thing to do is change your lifestyle so that the problem does not get worse. If you smoke, you must stop. If you are overweight, reduce your weight to ideal weight and have a healthy diet. A high blood cholesterol requires treatment. Regular moderate exercise is recommended. Try to keep your legs warm and dry. If you have rest pain in the feet, sleep with your legs dangling over the edge of the bed.

What are the special precautions?

Care of your feet is important, especially care of the toenails. When cutting toenails, avoid cutting the flesh; any wound is likely to get infected. It is advisable to have a podiatrist (chiropodist) care for your feet. Avoid injury to the legs and feet. Any simple wound is likely to break down and form an ulcer, which can take months to heal. Consult your doctor if you have any problems, especially an unusual change in the colour of your feet or a sudden onset of pain.