

Postural hypotension (Low blood pressure on sitting/standing up)

What is it?

Postural hypotension describes a drop in blood pressure sufficient to cause an inadequate blood supply to the brain

What are the symptoms?

You may feel dizzy and/or faint causing you to fall or blackout when:

- getting up quickly from lying or sitting positions,
- standing still for any length of time,
- getting out of a warm bath,
- standing up after a big meal.

You will usually feel better if you lie or sit down.

What causes it?

It can occur at any age but is more common in older people. Common causes include:-

- certain medicines (your doctor will advise you),
- prolonged bed rest,
- dehydration (a lack of water in the body),
- rare conditions of the nerves.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will measure your blood pressure at least once while you are lying down and again, after a minute or two, while you are standing up.

If your doctor finds such falls in blood pressure, s/he may be able to give you advice, reduce your present medicines or start you on specific tablet treatment.

What should I do if I feel dizzy?

- Sit down immediately.
- If possible lie down flat.
- Put your legs in the air, for example against a wall.

When you feel well again, get up cautiously. However if you have further symptoms you may need to lie down again.

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Postural hypotension - continued

How can I prevent symptoms occurring?

- Take particular care in the morning. Blood pressure tends to be lowest in the morning and therefore symptoms are likely to be worst.
- Get out of bed in stages. Cross and uncross your legs firmly before sitting up and again before standing. Sit down again promptly if you have symptoms at any time.
- Avoid sudden changes in posture. Bending suddenly may make your symptoms worse. Try to pause in between changes in posture.
- Avoid sitting/standing for long periods. If you do have to stand still, then rock forward on the balls of your feet to encourage blood flow.
- Raise the head of your bed with blocks. Use bricks or heavy books to raise the head of the bed by about 6 inches (an occupational therapist can advise on this).
- Wear support stockings or tights. This helps return blood to the heart. Take them off before going to bed.

What can I eat and drink to help my symptoms?

- Increase your fluid intake. You need to drink 3-4 pints (1.5 - 2 litres) of fluids per day, aiming to keep your urine clear all day.
- Drink strong tea or coffee. This will help keep your blood pressure up. Drink up to five cups per day.
- Take small, frequent meals. Some patients have large drops in blood pressure one or two hours after meals. Small meals help prevent this problem.
- Avoid excess alcohol. Alcohol will make your symptoms worse. You may find that you can tolerate a small drink but avoid taking large amounts in one go.
- Increase your salt intake. Only do this after discussion with your doctor. Do not increase your salt intake if you are receiving treatment for high blood pressure.

Are there any other treatments for postural hypotension?

Ideally we try to avoid using medicines to help symptoms but in some cases this is necessary. Your doctor will always be able to discuss the pros and cons of any prescribed medicine.

Older People's Unit
Royal United Hospital, Bath BA1 3NG
Phone: 01225 821206

(Written by a consultant geriatrician and checked by volunteer readers)

January 2006