What is Postural Hypotension?

Patient / Family Information Leaflet

What is postural hypotension or orthostatic hypotension?

Postural or orthostatic hypotension can be described as a ‘head rush’ or ‘dizzy spell’ which often occurs when a person changes their body position (posture), typically from lying to standing or sometimes sitting.

This can result in a decreased blood flow to your brain, causing dizziness and sometimes falls.

It can be diagnosed by a doctor or nurse recording a blood pressure when you are lying down and then again within a minute of you standing, and sometimes after 3 minutes of standing.

What causes postural hypotension?

There are several causes of postural hypotension, and sometimes it can be affected by more than one cause in one person. Postural hypotension is more common in the elderly, and in some patients with conditions such as diabetes and Parkinson’s disease, and in people who may be more susceptible to having a low blood pressure, although it can occur in anyone.

It can be caused by:

- A decreased circulatory volume or being dehydrated.
- Having too much ‘water medication’ (diuretics) and becoming dry.
- Drugs that reduce blood pressure.
- Anaemia
- Mobilising after prolonged bed rest.

Sometimes however there is no particular obvious cause of this condition.

What are the symptoms of postural hypotension?

A fall in blood pressure leads to a reduced blood supply to the brain and other organs and muscles which can cause a variety of symptoms including:

- Feeling dizzy or light headed particularly on standing up.
- Feeling confused or muddled.
- Losing consciousness without warning.
- Blurred vision
- Pain can occur in a variety of places – neck, shoulder, lower back and buttocks, including angina type pain in the chest.
- Weakness and fatigue.

Symptoms will vary from person to person.
When are symptoms likely to happen?

When there is an increased demand on the circulatory system, for example:

- Moving – standing or sitting up suddenly – particularly from lying to standing.
- In the morning – blood pressure will tend to be lower in the mornings.
- During exercise
- After meals as blood is needed by the digestive system. In particular big meals or sugary food or alcohol has this affect.
- Straining – if you are constipated or having difficulty passing urine.

What can you do to help reduce the symptoms?

Avoid becoming dehydrated and try to drink 3 ½ pints (2 litres) of fluid every day, preferably water. Drink a large glass of water before getting out of bed in the mornings.

Avoid getting up quickly or hurrying. When getting out of bed, sit on the edge with your legs hanging down for a few minutes before standing. Sit down to do tasks where you may be standing, such as getting dressed or preparing vegetables.

Avoid standing still for long periods of time.

Avoid overheating, such as having very hot baths, or getting overheated in a warm room.

Avoid becoming constipated and ensure your diet is high in fibre.

Do sleep with your head 5 inches above the horizontal and as already mentioned, rise from bed slowly.

Do ask your doctor if any new medication is likely to affect your blood pressure. Speak to your pharmacist if you cannot reach the doctor.

Do ask your doctor to assess your bone health as postural hypotension can make you more prone to falls, and you may benefit from medication which can strengthen your bones.
What should you do if you get symptoms?

Think of the symptoms as a warning that your blood pressure is too low. The only way to improve your blood pressure and maintain your safety is to:

- **STOP** what you are doing.
- **SIT DOWN.**
- **DRINK** some water.
- **THINK** about what triggered your symptoms.

If you have frequent symptoms you should contact your GP for further advice.

**DO NOT STOP TAKING ANY MEDICATION WITHOUT DISCUSSING WITH YOUR DOCTOR FIRST.**

Is there treatment available?

In many cases no treatment is required once the reason for the postural hypotension is identified and treated. This may be by correcting dehydration, modifying medication or sometimes in the person modifying their lifestyle.

Getting into a routine of regular simple exercise can be beneficial. These can be exercises in your armchair, for example, flexing your ankle up and down, and gentle marching movements. You may also enjoy a tailored exercise class. You should be able to get details from your local Sports Centre of local AGE UK.

In some cases the wearing of elastic stockings can be beneficial, but they must be prescribed by your doctor as they could be contraindicated in certain medical conditions.

In a few cases medication is required to prevent postural hypotension.
Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01932 723553 or email pals@asph.nhs.uk. If you still remain concerned please contact our Complaints Manager on 01932 722612 or email complaints@asph.nhs.uk.