What Is Raynaud’s Phenomenon?

by BRANDY OSTLER

Lupus and Raynaud's

I remember it well — the first time I noticed the numb, painful, blue fingers on my hands.

I lived in the Las Vegas valley, which is known for warm temperatures. However, there were times it could get bitterly cold — at least to those of us who were accustomed to the warm desert climate. My son was a soccer player at the time and often had evening games. I never missed a single one, but the chill that came with those after sunset games was certainly a challenge.

After one particular game, upon our return to the warmth and safety of our vehicle, I was unable to comfortably turn the key and I couldn't feel the steering wheel.

My mom asked me, “What’s wrong with your fingers?” They were blue and ice cold. I had assumed it was simply due to the frigid temperature I wasn't used to; however, my mother’s fingers looked perfectly normal and did not have the icy chill that mine had.

As they began to warm up, the feeling of pins and needles was overwhelming. My newly discovered “color-changing fingers” were a mystery to me.

What Is Raynaud's Phenomenon?

Raynaud’s phenomenon was probably one of the earliest visual symptoms of lupus that I displayed. After that first experience, I noticed this phenomenon presenting itself more frequently.

It could be instigated by common situations such as being in an air-conditioned room or opening the refrigerator. The more I paid attention, the more I noticed. My fingers would first turn white, followed by the blue color that in many ways looked like death to me.

Eventually, after briskly rubbing my hands together, they would turn bright red as they finally returned to normal. As time went on, normal was not something I experienced very often.

My hands were always cold. People would often shudder when I touched them from the shock of the frozen sensation.

Before long, my toes began exhibiting the same icy cold condition. This became more difficult to deal with as my home was tiled, and I enjoyed going barefoot in the house most of the time but the new lupus toe pain was too much. It was annoying, and I did not understand what was going on, but I knew something had to change.

It was not difficult for my doctor to diagnose Raynaud's, as both my fingers and toes displayed the condition when sitting in the often chilly exam room. Raynaud’s (which is referred to as a disease, syndrome, or phenomenon

depending on if it is primary or secondary in nature) is a response to cold temperatures or stressful situations.

Basically, it is caused by the narrowing of the smaller arteries that supply blood to the skin. This ‘vasospasm’ restricts blood flow and circulation to the affected areas — mostly fingers and toes, but the nose and ears can be affected as well.

Certainly this condition can vary in severity, and although not always debilitating, it can greatly affect quality of life. In extreme cases, blisters can accompany the condition and the possibility of losing fingers or toes due to amputation certainly exists. It is of the utmost importance that those who suffer from Raynaud’s take measures to treat and protect themselves from these outcomes.

My doctor has been adamant that I take precautions to improve my quality of life as this condition has not only been frequent, but quite disabling for me. Medically, my doctor has prescribed diltiazem, which is a calcium beta blocker that works by relaxing blood vessels, to help control Raynaud’s attacks.

Other medications and topical creams can also be prescribed; however, pharmaceutical treatment is not always necessary. Over the years, I have discovered a few remedies for dealing with an attack naturally as well as some easily incorporated ideas for limiting the frequency of the attacks or (hopefully) preventing them altogether.

Next page: treating and preventing a Raynaud's attack.

Treating a Raynaud’s Attack

Warm the Affected Area

This can be accomplished in a number of ways:

- **If the attack is in your fingers, rub your hands briskly together to increase blood flow.** You can also wiggle your fingers (or toes) to help get the blood circulating.
- **Run warm water over your hands or place your feet in a warm tub.** A warm shower or bath can also do the trick — just be sure the room is also warm so that you do not face an additional attack when leaving the shower or bath.
- **Use hand and feet warmers.** There are a number of brands to choose from and they work in a variety of ways. Some can be placed inside pockets, gloves, shoes, or hats; while others have adhesives that can be adhered to socks or other materials. You can find both disposable and reusable warmers that provide extra warmth for a varied amount of time.
- **Utilize heated slippers, socks, insoles, gloves, mittens, earmuffs, or headbands.** Again, there are a variety of products available that incorporate natural heat activation or battery powered heat delivery. Apply a heating pad or warm compress to the affected areas.

Use Essential Oils

I have found essential oil therapy to be useful with a multitude of my lupus symptoms, including Raynaud’s phenomenon. Consult advice from medical or holistic doctors as necessary.

- Specific essential oils for use in the treatment of Raynaud’s include: clove, fennel, geranium, helichrysum, lavender, nutmeg, rosemary and cypress (primary for effectiveness).
- Be sure to use therapeutic grade oils for best results.
- All oils mentioned can be used topically by diluting as necessary and applying to the affected area, carotid arteries, and on Vita Flex points on the feet.
- All oils mentioned can be used aromatically by diffusing into the air; you can inhale oil directly or applied to hands, tissue, or a cotton wick. (If applied to hands, be sure to dilute if necessary).

Participate in Stress-relieving Activities

If your Raynaud’s attacks are triggered by stress, manage stress with activities such as meditation or massage therapy.

Limiting/Preventing a Raynaud’s Attack

- **Do not smoke**. Smoking constricts blood vessels, which can lead to vasospasms and cause a Raynaud’s attack; therefore, avoid smoking and limit your exposure to second-hand smoke.
- **Avoid medications linked to Raynaud’s**. This includes certain over-the-counter cold medicines as well as medications that affect blood vessels.
- **Keep your feet covered, even when indoors (especially when walking on tile, concrete, or other cold surfaces).** However, be sure the socks/slippers are not too constricting and that they have skid guards if you are prone to slipping.
- **Use mittens or gloves when opening the freezer or refrigerator.** Also wear them when handling packaged frozen foods and products or cold containers (such as beverage cans and water bottles).
- **Wear socks and gloves when going outside.** Regardless of temperature, windy conditions can chill your hands and feet.

Next page: more ways to prevent a Raynaud's attack.

Limiting/Preventing a Raynaud's Attack

- **Have warm items handy.** Murphy’s Law tells us the less prepared we are, the more likely we will experience a problem; therefore make sure you have hand/feet warmers, heating pads, sweaters, throws, electric blankets, and portable radiators or heaters on hand should you need them!
- **Exercise has been shown to increase circulation and blood flow, so participate as tolerated.** Examples include walking on a treadmill, arm windmills, or practicing yoga.
- **Utilize essential oil therapy.** Regularly diffuse oils (see treatments above for a list of essential oils). A variety of diffusers are available to suit your needs.
- **Incorporate holistic options into your treatment.** Try biofeedback (which is guided imagery — there are a number of techniques available from a variety of sources including books and DVDs) or acupuncture (which has been shown to increase circulation).
- **Avoid stressful situations as much as possible.** Otherwise, be prepared to manage them as explained above.
- **Incorporate supplements in your diet**. Fish oil and ginkgo have both been shown to increase tolerance to cold and decrease Raynaud’s attacks. However, you should always seek medical advice before using supplements as there is a potential for drug interactions or side effects.
- **Raynaud’s specific products**. Recently I discovered some gloves and socks intentionally designed to combat Raynaud’s attacks. Although I have not personally used these products, they certainly show promise. The gloves and socks are designed to be comfortably worn, even when engaging in common daily tasks. They are made using infrared therapy and you can even get gloves with touch screen tips on the fingers and thumb for smartphone or tablet users.

Other Considerations

Raynaud’s phenomenon is annoying, but it can be managed. By using the tips I’ve shared, hopefully you will find your attacks to be less frequent and easier to manage.

Here are some final words on staying protected against Raynaud's:

- **Keep your thermostat set a degree or two warmer.** I have found that this has helped tremendously as my core body temperature has dropped since being diagnosed with lupus.
- **Use insulated drinking glasses or beverage holders.** This will keep the cold off of your hands.
- **If you happen to live in a colder climate, always be sure to bundle up.** Also be sure to warm your car

before driving when you have to be out in the cold weather.

Although Raynaud’s attacks can still occur in warmer climates, particularly when the temperature drops, you might consider relocating to a warmer area if your Raynaud’s is severe and all other options have failed. Furthermore, do your best to avoid dramatic temperature changes, unnecessary stress, and the frozen food section in the grocery store!

May you be blessed with many days of happy, warm fingers and toes — without the color-changing phenomenon!