Patient Information
Intermittent Claudication

What is intermittent claudication?
Intermittent claudication is pain in the leg brought on by walking and is caused by poor blood flow to the muscles. It is intermittent because it only comes on with walking or exercise and goes away when you rest.

Patients often complain of aching, cramping or tired legs that is brought about by exercise and relieved by resting for a few minutes. Depending on the level of the disease patients may experience pain in the buttocks, thigh, calf or foot.

Symptoms are usually gradual and worsen over a period of months.

What causes intermittent claudication?
Narrowing or blockage of the arteries is caused by atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). It means that the extra blood needed when you exercise cannot reach the muscles. When the muscles get short of blood they start to ‘seize’ up or cramp causing tightness and pain. After a short rest the muscles will recover, but more walking will bring the discomfort on after a short while. Blockage or narrowing of any of the arteries carrying blood to your legs can be affected.

You must be aware that there are other causes of leg pain on walking and a specialist examination will be needed to find out whether narrowed arteries are the real cause of your pain.

Is intermittent claudication dangerous?
No. It is a nuisance but not an immediate danger. It is a warning sign that the arteries have started to become blocked. Patients can manage their symptoms by following this leaflet advice.

If you suffer pain at rest you must tell your doctor immediately as this would indicate the disease has worsened.
What are the risk factors of intermittent claudication?
The main risk factors are:-

- **Smoking**
  Many people with intermittent claudication are smokers. Giving up smoking is extremely important. It is well known that tobacco use is strongly linked to heart disease however, it is less commonly appreciated by patients that it is also strongly linked to the onset and progression of vascular disease including intermittent claudication.

  Smoke contains over 4,000 active compounds and affects blood vessels in several ways. The nicotine causes the blood vessels to narrow reducing blood flow to the extremities. It raises heart rate and blood pressure. Inhaled carbon monoxide from tobacco reduces oxygen transport to the tissues.

  We know how hard it can be to give up smoking. But when you’re ready to stop you don’t have to go it alone. Stop Smoking Wales offers free, friendly, local NHS support that really works. Stop Smoking Wales will help you plan and prepare for your quit date and provide ongoing help and advice. Contact Stop Smoking Wales on (free phone) 0800 085 2219.

- **Exercise**
  Taking exercise by regular walking is important and may help your symptoms to improve. You will do no harm trying to walk as far as your comfort allows. Exercise related to intermittent claudication has a unique role as it enhances the development of a collateral circulation where by exercise encourages small (bypass) arteries in the legs to carry more blood.

  Exercise such as walking, stair climbing, cycling can help, but exercise programs need to be carefully chosen and adjusted to a patient’s lifestyle and fitness.

- **Diet/Obesity (High cholesterol)**
  Abnormal fat levels in the blood result in atherosclerosis. High cholesterol is a significant risk factor for developing vascular disease and intermittent claudication. If you are overweight than it is helpful to lose weight. A low fat diet is recommended and if you wish you can be referred to a dietician for advice and support, to suit your individual needs.
**Hypertension (High blood pressure)**

High blood pressure is a significant risk factor in vascular disease and is associated with the development of atherosclerosis and claudication.

If you have high blood pressure it is usually managed by your own doctor who will also recommend that you:-

- exercise
- reduce weight
- reduce alcohol
- reduce salt in food
- your doctor may also prescribe medication.

Please ensure you have your blood pressure checked regularly.

**How do I prevent my symptoms getting worse?**

As discussed overleaf, it is important that you exercise, eat healthily, control your weight and maintain a stable blood pressure.

Your doctor may prescribe aspirin 75mg one per day. This helps to thin the blood. It also protects your heart. You may require Cholesterol lowering tablets.

It is also important that you take care of your feet as you are more prone to developing foot problems.

**What is the best treatment for me?**

The doctor will discuss this with you and will ask how badly your intermittent claudication affects your life. Based on this, the doctor will consider which treatment option is best for you.

Remember in most cases intermittent claudication may not get much worse for many years, and it seldom leads to serious trouble. If you give up smoking and control other risk factors no other treatment may be necessary.

**If I am worried about anything who can I contact?**

If you wish to talk to someone about your condition or you need further advice and information please ring:-

Tracey Hutchings on:- 01633 - 234373 alternatively you can ask switchboard to bleep her on:- 0359.