Phlebitis

Phlebitis is a redness, tenderness and soreness (*inflammation*) in a vein. This can occur in your arms, legs, or torso (*trunk*), as well as deeper inside your body.

CAUSES

Phlebitis can be triggered by multiple factors. These include:

- Reduced (*restricted*) blood flow through your veins. This happens with prolonged bed rest, long distance travel, injury or surgery. Being overweight (*obese*) and pregnant can also restrict blood flow and lead to phlebitis.
- Putting a catheter in the vein (*intravenous* or *IV*) and giving certain medications through in the vein (*intravenously*).
- Cancer and cancer treatment.
- Use of illegal intravenous drugs.
- Inflammatory diseases.
- Inherited (*genetic*) diseases that increase the risk for blood clots.
- Hormone therapy (such as birth control pills).

SYMPTOMS

- Red, tender, swollen, painful area on your skin.
- Usually, the area will be long and narrow.
- Low grade fever.
- Significant firmness along the center of this area. This can indicate that a blood clot has formed.
- Surrounding redness or a high fever, which can indicate an infection (*cellulitis*).

DIAGNOSIS

- The appearance of your condition and your symptoms will cause your caregiver to suspect phlebitis. Usually, this is enough for a diagnosis.
- Your caregiver may request blood tests or an ultrasound test of the area to be sure you do not have an infection or a blood clot. Blood tests and discussing your family history may also indicate if you have an underlying genetic disease that causes blood clots.
- Occasionally, a piece of tissue is taken from the body (*biopsy*) if an unusual cause of phlebitis is suspected.

TREATMENT

- Raise (*elevate*) the affected area above the level of the heart.
- Apply a warm compress or heating pad for 20 minutes, 3 or 4 times a day. If you use an electric heating pad, follow the directions so you do not burn yourself.
- Anti-inflammatory medications are usually recommended. Follow your caregiver's directions.
- Any IV catheter, if present, will be removed by your caregiver.
- Your caregiver may prescribe medicines that kill germs (*antibiotics*) if an infection is present.
- Your caregiver may recommend blood thinners if a blood clot is suspected or present.
- Support stockings or bandages may be helpful, depending on the cause and location of the phlebitis.
- Surgery may be needed to remove very damaged sections of vein, but this is rare.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Take medications exactly as prescribed.
- Follow up with your caregiver as directed.
- Use support stockings or bandages if advised. These will speed healing and prevent recurrence.
- If you are on blood thinners:
  - Do follow-up blood tests exactly as directed.

- Check with your caregiver before using any new medications.
- Wear a pendant to show that you are on blood thinners.

- For phlebitis in the legs:
  - Avoid prolonged standing or bed rest.
  - Keep your legs moving. Raise your legs with sitting or lying.
- **Do not** smoke.
- Women, particularly those over the age of 35, should consider the risks and benefits of taking the contraceptive pill. This kind of hormone treatment can increase your risk for blood clots.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have unusual bruising or any bleeding problems.
- Swelling or pain in your affected arm or leg is not gradually improving.
- You are on anti-inflammatory medication and you develop belly (*abdominal*) pain.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- An unexplained oral temperature above 100.5º F (38.1º C) develops.
- You have sudden onset of chest pain or difficulty breathing.

Document Released: 12/12/2002 Document Re-Released: 10/15/2010
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