Digit Distress

Walk The Block And Weep With Pain
"Rings on the fingers..." And Pain in the Toes

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Remember the little verse? "Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, she shall have music wherever she goes." Now there's a rhyme to dance to. But not if she has thromboangitis obliterans. And what is this disease with the polysyllabic name? It's a generic term for a disease that mimics not just one but several illnesses that attack the small arteries of hands and feet; mostly the feet.

Picture with me thousands of tiny tubes, little arteries and veins, which carry blood to and from hands and feet, fingers and toes. In health they are smooth and flexible, soft and pliant. In disease they may become stiff and thickened, reluctant to convey the blood into and from the digits. And this spells trouble; and it's called Buerger's disease.

Here's a common scenario: Pain in the calves with walking, relief with rest. No time for dancing is this Buerger's malady, for whenever one walks, up stairs, up grades, or even straight and level, the legs begin to hurt. Find a place to rest, to sit, until the pain fades. Slacken off---until you walk again. When this pain-ease-pain phenomenon happens to the arteries in the heart, we call it angina (pectoris). In the legs, it's "intermittent claudication."

So then, who is a risk for Buerger's disease? For starters, it's a mans morbidity. For it is rarely found in the legs, hands and feet of women. In American men, the lifetime risk is around 10 in one hundred. It's worse than that in India, Japan and Southeast Asia. In the Middle East its prevalence can range up to 55% or more. In Jews of Ashkenazi ancestry the prevalence pushes up to 80%. But not in women who can put on their dancing shoes and waltz the night away.

Along with the pain, what other problems confront the victim of Buerger's? When blood doesn't flow with ease, oxygen-starved tissue dies. The upshot—ulcers of fingers and toes. Unheeded, tissue death can go on to outright gangrene. Then it's loss of digits by amputation. Not good.

Warning signs of Buerger's: fingers or toes that are pale. Or red. Or blue. Some have called it aptly, "blue toe disease." And of course there is the unsated pain.

When your doctor is clued in on Buerger's she/he will almost automatically think diabetes. Yes, sugar diabetes can mimic Buerger's and requires its very own remedies. Like diet—weight and sugar control. But Buerger's is almost uniquely a curse of the smoker. You don't smoke, you can skip Buerger's. And if you have it you can't get better until you quit. And quitting will set you free! It's not optional. Continue to smoke and proceed to amputations, almost guaranteed.

Is this another reason to eschew tobacco? You bet your arteries it is. So it's time to snuff out those old time bad guys once more; this time for good.