

Shiatsu and Raynaud's Disease

CASE STUDY

From: Susan Crawshaw, MRSS, Hereford & Abergavenny.

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Web: www.shiatsusan.co.uk

Have you painful white fingers? If so, you may have Raynaud's Disease.

About 15 years ago I saw that question on a poster on a bus shelter in London, and realised that's what I had. Outside summer, even relatively small temperature drops would make my hands so cold it felt like they were made of ice and then, as they recovered, feel like I'd put them into flames — incredibly painful. Recovery could take a long time and hand function was impaired.

In the mid-1990s I trained as a Shiatsu practitioner. During the 3-year course I learnt many self-development practices, including Chi Gong — Chinese exercises that cultivate 'Chi' or 'vital energy' (similar to T'ai Chi). In Oriental medical theory, the blood follows the Chi around the body, so working with Chi improves circulation. Whilst practising both Shiatsu and Chi Gong my hands tingle and get very warm. During my training I noticed that my Raynaud's symptoms reduced, and subsequently virtually disappeared. Only a recent conversation reminded me how bad it used to be. The only time I now suffer is when hiking on a very cold day and I stop for lunch ... holding the sandwiches brings on an attack, but it's fine if I keep moving!

It's estimated that 10% of UK women suffer to some degree, but Raynaud's affects men too. Small blood vessels at the extremities react oversensitively to temperature changes, starving them of blood. Fingers and toes are most commonly affected and will typically turn white, dead looking and, as the blood supply returns, blue and then bright red ... colour changes often accompanied by severe numbness, tingling or excruciating pain. Sometimes Raynaud's is a secondary symptom of another underlying condition such as Scleroderma, Rheumatoid Arthritis, or Systemic Lupus, or similar symptoms can occur from operating vibrating machinery or repetitive hand movements.

Self-help practices to promote circulation include stopping smoking, reducing alcohol intake, regular exercise and massage. Wearing warm clothing, carrying heat pads and avoiding touching cold surfaces with bare hands will help. Vitamin E or C supplements, fish oils, Evening Primrose Oil, Ginko Biloba or Ginger help some ... but consult your GP first especially if on medication. Shiatsu helps many and there are several T'ai Chi and Chi Gong classes around. For more information about Raynaud's, contact the Raynaud's & Scleroderma Association, Freephone: 0800 917 2494 or www.raynauds.org.uk.