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### ***Blood Flow Problems and Sexual Health***

Low blood flow to the pelvic organs can affect arousal, engorgement, and lubrication. This disorder is named “clitoral and vaginal vascular insufficiency syndrome”, which has a variety of causes. Each of these problems often interacts with the others. Among the most common are:

- **Coronary Heart Disease:** This is also known as atherosclerosis, is the buildup of fatty material called plaque along the inside walls of the arteries. The buildup narrows the arteries and ultimately can cut off blood flow to vital organs like the heart or brain, causing heart attack or stroke. The same buildup can restrict blood flow to the arteries leading to the pelvis and genitalia, causing diminished arousal. Human studies show that diminished pelvic blood flow can lead to thickening and fibrosis of both the vaginal wall and smooth muscle tissue of the clitoris. This can lead to vaginal dryness and loss of the elasticity and moisture in the vagina.
- **High Blood Pressure:** This reflects an abnormal increased pressure of the blood flowing in the arteries as they feed organs and tissues. High blood pressure can lead to damage of blood vessels, making them more prone to a buildup of fatty deposits and coronary heart disease (see above). High blood pressure is known to cause erectile dysfunction, but its effect on women is just now being studied. It makes sense that high blood pressure in women can be associated with decreased pelvic and genital blood flow, also contributing to decreased sexual arousal, decreased vaginal lubrication, and pain.
- **High Cholesterol:** This involves the buildup of a waxy, non-soluble substance made up of different types of fat. Bad (LDL) cholesterol allows fat to build up in the walls of the arteries. A woman’s cholesterol level is one factor in her risk for heart disease. When a woman has high level of bad cholesterol, the fat builds up on the walls of the arteries stimulating abnormal growth of cells that scar and inflame the artery lining and lead to the formation of plaque. Large amounts of plaque can cut off the blood flow through the arteries to the vital organs and the pelvic region. Diminished blood flow will likely reduce woman’s sexual sensation and her ability to become sexually aroused.
- **Smoking:** This causes blood vessels to constrict, reducing the flow of blood to the heart, lower extremities, and the pelvic area. Toxic substances in the smoke may also damage the artery walls and help cause coronary heart disease. Long term, heavy smoking over a lifetime may well play a significant role in reducing blood flow to the pelvic region and cause a woman to have a diminished sexual experience.
- **Bicycle riding:** particularly prolonged riding on a standard bicycle seat may crush the bundles of nerves and arteries leading to the clitoris causing sexual dysfunction. In one study. Of 282 female bike riders, more than 40 percent reported clitoral numbness.

***What can you do?***

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Certainly, ceasing any health risk behaviors that are negatively impacting on your genital blood flow is important (e.g., smoking, high cholesterol, etc.). Beyond that, it is important to seek evaluation and treatment from a health care professional who is trained in treating female sexual function complaints. There are ways to evaluate blood flow to the genital area, as well as genital sensation and lubrication (both connected to blood flow) by using ultrasound and sensory perception devices. This way the problem can be diagnosed. In terms of treatment, there are several blood flow enhancing agents such as Viagra and the EROS-CTD and devices, as well as numerous other treatments presently under trial that you may be a candidate for so that some degree of blood flow can be restored in order to enhance your sexual response and function.

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