Here's Why Your Fingers and Toes Are Always Cold

By Ana-Marija Dolaskie — March 2, 2016

When properly equipped for the bitterness of winter, most people don't experience unusually cold hands and feet that turn colors, especially if gloves and warm socks are involved. But for some the painful experience is actually a disease, and it affects roughly 28 million Americans.

"It started about three winters ago," Amy Lassila, 33, from Michigan, said of the constant numbing of her fingers and toes. "I'd be outside ten minutes or less, and my toes would turn bright red and swell."

After a visit to the clinic, Lassila's doctor suggested she suffers from Raynaud's (pronounced RAY-nohzh) disease, a condition that causes spasms in the blood vessels which, in turn, cuts off circulation, normally affecting the toes and fingers (though it also may affect the nose, lips, ears, and nipples -- ouch!).

The severity and frequency of Raynaud's varies from person to person. According to the Mayo Clinic [2], when exposed to cold temperatures the hands and feet may turn white and blue and begin to feel numb. As they warm and blood begins to circulate, they may swell, turn red, throb or tingle. That's when, Lassila says, the pain begins.

"They really don't hurt when they're cold," Lassila said. "Once I warm back up is when I really feel the pain in my toes, which can last a few hours."

The exact cause of Raynaud's isn't well known among the medical community, though stress and cold temperatures have been identified as the triggers. Taking something out of the freezer, or even holding an iced drink can trigger an attack.

It's important to note that there are two types of the condition:

Primary Raynaud's -- also called Raynaud's disease. This is the more common type of Raynaud's and it is usually associated with genetics and not associated with an underlying medical problem. Those who are diagnosed with Raynaud's disease almost always have a family member who also suffers from the condition.

Secondary Raynaud's -- also called Raynaud's Phenomenon. This form of the disease could be
a bit more serious, as it is always linked to an underlying problem. Causes of secondary Raynaud’s may include: connective tissue disease, disease of the arteries, carpal tunnel syndrome, smoking, and severe injury, or certain medications may trigger the condition.

So what can be done? If your Raynaud’s is secondary, treating the underlying condition is key. If it is primary, managing the symptoms is your best option. In some cases, you may have the option to take medication that widens the blood vessels. But for the most part, investing in a quality pair of mittens and Smartwool socks [3], and avoiding cold temperatures will do the trick. If you live in a fairly cold climate, like Amy, keeping hand and toe warmers handy will make all the difference.