Von Willebrand Disease...
the most common bleeding disorder

Your Questions Answered

How can I control my heavy periods?

Why do I bleed so much at the dentist?

Why do I bruise so easily?

Why do I get so many nosebleeds?
This booklet has been adapted from the Canadian Hemophilia Society (CHS) publication, *All about von Willebrand Disease… for People with von Willebrand Disease and their Families* written by David Page.

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*The CHS consults qualified medical professionals before distributing any medical information. However, the CHS does not practice medicine and in no circumstances recommends particular treatments for specific individuals. In all cases, it is recommended that individuals consult a physician before pursuing any course of treatment.*

For further information, please contact:

Canadian Hemophilia Society  
625 President Kennedy, Suite 1210  
Montreal, Quebec  
H3A 1K2

Telephone: (514) 848-0503  
1-(800) 668-2686  
Fax: (514) 848-9661  
e-mail: chs@hemophilia.ca  
Web site: www.hemophilia.ca

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*Von Willebrand Disease… the most common bleeding disorder  
Your Questions Answered*

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What is von Willebrand Disease?

Von Willebrand Disease (vWD) is the most common bleeding disorder that people have.

There are various types of vWD. (Type 1, Type 2, Type 3). All the different types are caused by a problem with the von Willebrand factor (vWF). This is a protein in blood which is necessary for proper blood coagulation, or clotting.

When there is not enough vWF in the blood, or when it does not work the way it should, the blood takes longer to clot.

How does blood clot normally?

Blood is carried throughout the body within a network of blood vessels. When tissues are injured, damage to a blood vessel may result in leakage of blood through holes in the vessel wall. The vessels can break near the surface, as in a cut. Or they can break deep inside the body, making a bruise or an internal hemorrhage.

When a blood vessel is damaged, there are four stages in the normal formation of a clot. See Figure 1.
Stage 1: The blood vessels constrict to slow the flow of blood to the injured area. This is called vasoconstriction.

Stage 2: Platelets, which are small cells less than 1/10,000 of a centimetre in diameter circulating in the blood, stick to and spread on the walls of the damaged blood vessel.

Stage 3: Von Willebrand factor acts as a glue to hold the platelets in place at the site of the damage to the blood vessel.

Stage 4: The surface of these platelets then provides a surface on which blood clotting can occur. Clotting proteins circulating in the blood gather on the surface of the platelets to form a mesh-like fibrin clot, similar to a scab.
How does vWD affect the normal clotting of blood?

Von Willebrand Disease affects the last three stages in the blood clotting process. See Figure 2.

**Stage 1:** The blood vessels of people with vWD constrict normally.

**Stages 2 and 3:** A person with vWD may not have enough vWF in the blood, or it may not work normally. Because of this, the vWF cannot act as a glue to hold the platelets in place at the site of the damage to the blood vessel. The platelets do not stick to the lining of the vessel.

**Stage 4:** The vWF carries factor 8 (written factor VIII) in the bloodstream. Factor VIII is one of the proteins needed to make a solid clot. When the vWF is present at low levels, so is factor VIII. Without normal levels of factor VIII, a solid clot takes a very long time to form.

**Figure 2** Abnormal von Willebrand factor (vWF)
How common is von Willebrand Disease?

Doctors now think that vWD could affect as many as 1 in 100 people, or 300,000 Canadians. Because many of these people have only very mild symptoms, only a small number of them know they have the disease. Research has shown that as many as 99 out of 100 people with von Willebrand Disease have not been diagnosed.

A study reported that 1 woman out of 5 who went to see their doctors because of heavy, prolonged bleeding during their periods (menorrhagia) actually has a bleeding disorder.

Who can have von Willebrand Disease?

Von Willebrand Disease affects both men and women. However, because vWD can cause heavy menstrual bleeding and prolonged bleeding after childbirth, more women than men have noticeable symptoms.

Children, too, can have vWD. They are born with it. This is because vWD is a hereditary disorder.

How does a person get von Willebrand Disease?

vWD is a hereditary disorder. There are two ways of getting the hereditary form of vWD. See Figure 3.

- It can be passed from a parent who has the defective gene (even if this person has no symptoms of vWD) to a child at the time of conception. The parent is called a carrier.

- One of the baby’s genes can undergo a change. This is called a genetic mutation. The baby’s parents do not carry this defective gene, and the parents’ other children would not inherit it.

Male and female children have an equal chance of inheriting vWD.
Figure 3

Mary John

Ann Charles

Ann Isabel Peter

Julia David Robert Claire Helen

Joyce Robert

Sue Cathy Daniel

normal
mild von Willebrand disease
severe von Willebrand disease
Is there always a history of bleeding in the family?

Not always. There are several reasons why.

- The level of vWF is not the same from person to person even in the same family. As a result, one person may bleed more than another.

- Blood type can play a role. People with Type O blood often have lower levels of vWF than people with Types A, B and AB. So people with Type O blood may have more problems with bleeding.

- Doctors believe there are other factors that also affect how severe symptoms are, but they are not yet well known.

- There may be no history of the disease because no one else in the family has it. The baby could have gotten the abnormal gene through a new mutation. In this case, chromosome 12 changes at conception or soon after. That baby’s parents are not carriers. However, the baby, after growing up, could the pass on vWD to its children.

How serious is von Willebrand Disease?

It depends on the type of vWD. Most people have such mild cases that they never know they have the disease. Others only realize they have a bleeding problem after a serious accident or surgery. Some people with vWD bleed quite frequently.

Is there a cure for von Willebrand Disease?

No, there isn’t. It is a lifelong, most often mild, condition. Fortunately, there are safe, effective treatments for all types of vWD.
What are the symptoms of von Willebrand Disease?

Common symptoms of vWD are:
- easy bruising
- heavy menstrual periods
- frequent or prolonged nosebleeds
- prolonged bleeding after injury, surgery, childbirth, or dental work.

What other signs of a bleeding disorder are seen in women?

Heavy, prolonged menstrual bleeding is the most common symptom for women with vWD. Some women have heavy bleeding throughout the normal menstrual period. This is called menorrhagia.

Other women bleed unpredictably throughout the month. This is called metrorrhagia.

The following guidelines should alert a woman to a potential problem:

- flow which lasts longer than 7 days
- flow soaking one maxipad in less than 2 hours
- unpredictable bleeding
- menstrual bleeding which affects quality of life
- periods heavy enough to cause anemia.

In a woman with vWD, comparison to other family members can be misleading as they, too, may be affected by vWD.
Are symptoms of von Willebrand Disease the same for everybody?

No. The symptoms of vWD vary greatly from person to person. Even members of the same family will have different symptoms.

Most people have such mild cases that they never know they have the disease. Others only realize they have a bleeding problem after a serious accident or surgery. Some people with vWD bleed quite frequently.

The type of vWD affects the severity of the symptoms.

• Type 1 vWD is the most common form, accounting for 75% of all cases of vWD. In Type 1 vWD, the von Willebrand factor (vWF) works normally, but there is not enough of it.

• Type 2 vWD is less common than Type 1. It represents 20-25% of all cases. In Type 2 vWD, the amount of vWF in people’s blood is often normal. The problem is that the vWF does not work properly.

• Type 3 vWD is very rare. However, it is the most severe type of vWD. People with Type 3 vWD have very little vWF in their blood. As a result, bleeding can happen often and, if untreated, can be serious.
**Is diagnosing von Willebrand Disease easy?**

No, diagnosing vWD is not easy. Many doctors are not familiar with it. As a result, vWD is often misdiagnosed. Diagnosing vWD is difficult even for an experienced doctor. This is because the results of a person’s blood tests can vary from day to day. The test results can be normal, even when the person has vWD. There are a number of factors that cause the level of vWF to rise in the blood and appear to be normal. Some of them are:

- being pregnant
- breastfeeding
- normal hormonal changes during a woman’s monthly menstrual cycle
- being on the birth control pill (oral contraceptive)
- having an infection
- having recently undergone surgery
- having recently had a blood transfusion
- doing a lot of exercise.

**Are routine blood tests a good way to diagnose von Willebrand Disease?**

No, they are not. Routine blood tests will often give normal results in people who have von Willebrand Disease.

With this condition:

- the prothrombin time is always normal
- the partial thromboplastin time is often normal and
- the bleeding time is often normal.

In fact, the test for bleeding time is the least accurate of all tests used.
Where should I go to get tested for von Willebrand Disease?

A person who thinks he/she has a bleeding problem should see a hematologist who specializes in bleeding disorders. Such a doctor can be found at a Hemophilia/Bleeding Disorder Comprehensive Care Program. Ask your family physician or gynecologist for a referral. See page 13 for more information.
Is medical treatment always necessary for bleeds?

No. Minor bleeding episodes associated with vWD often do not require medical treatment. For example:

- small bruises usually disappear on their own
- larger bruises or minor bleeding into muscles or joints can often be controlled by applying cold (an ice pack wrapped in a towel) and elevating the limb
- bleeding from minor cuts can be stopped by applying pressure.
- nose bleeds may be stopped with simple first aid techniques

However, sometimes medical treatment is necessary.

Where is the best place for a person with von Willebrand Disease to get treatment?

Few doctors are familiar with vWD. Even hematologists, who deal with diseases of the blood, are rarely experts in diagnosing and treating bleeding disorders. Many obstetricians and gynecologists remain unaware of the consequences of vWD for women.

Therefore, the best place for a person with vWD to get treatment is a Hemophilia/Bleeding Disorder Comprehensive Care Program.

Once a proper diagnosis has been made, and a treatment plan has been organized, the doctors at the Hemophilia/Bleeding Disorder Comprehensive Care Program can work with the individual and his/her family physician to provide care.
What are the treatment options for von Willebrand Disease?

The type of treatment depends in part on the type of vWD a person has:

Treatment options include:

• **Oral contraceptives** (the Pill) raise the level of von Willebrand factor in the blood.

• **Desmopressin acetate** is a synthetic drug which is a copy of a natural hormone. Desmopressin can be given by:
  – intravenous infusion or injection under the skin. This medication is DDAVP® Injection or Octostim®. Note that DDAVP® Injection (4ug per 1 ml. ampoule) and Octostim® (15 ug per 1 ml. ampoule) are the same drug in different strengths.
  – nasal spray. This medication is Octostim® Nasal Spray.

• **Tranexamic acid** (Cyklokapron®) and **aminocaproic acid** (Amicar®) are drugs that help to hold a clot in place once it has formed.

• **Thrombin** and **fibrin glue** are removed from blood and manufactured as natural clotting agents that come in powder form. They can be applied directly to the site of bleeding.

• **FVIII/vWF concentrate** (Humate P®) is made from pooled human plasma. This concentrate replaces the missing vWF in the blood long enough to allow clotting to take place.
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…the most common bleeding disorder

Your Questions Answered

For more information please contact the Canadian Hemophilia Society. We’re the largest national consumer organization working to ensure that, for people with bleeding disorders, the bleeding stops.

- Canadian Hemophilia Society National Office
  625 President Kennedy, Suite 1210
  Montréal, Québec H3A 1K2
  Tel: (514) 848-0503
  Toll-free: 1-800-668-2686
  Fax: (514) 848-9661
  E-mail: chs@hemophilia.ca
  Website: www.hemophilia.ca

- British Columbia Chapter
  Canadian Hemophilia Society
  P.O. Box 78039 North Side
  Port Coquitlam, British Columbia
  V3B 7H5
  Tel: (604) 688-8186
  E-mail: contact@hemophiliabc.ca
  Website: www.hemophiliabc.ca

- Alberta Chapter
  P.O. Box 58060
  Edmonton, Alberta
  T5L 4Z4
  Tel: (780) 915-4492
  Fax: (780) 459-2548

- Hemophilia Saskatchewan
  2366 Avenue C North
  Unit 213
  Saskatoon, SK
  S7L 5X5
  Tel: (306) 653-4366
  Fax: (306) 933-9664

- Manitoba Chapter
  Canadian Hemophilia Society
  932A Erin Street
  Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 2W5
  Tel: (204) 775-8625
  Fax: (204) 722-0399
  E-mail: hemophilia@mbnet.mb.ca
  Website: www.mbnet.mb.ca/~hemophil

- Hemophilia Ontario
  60 St. Clair Avenue East
  Suite 308
  Toronto, Ontario M4T 1N5
  Tel: (416) 972-0641
  Toll-free: 1-888-838-8846
  Fax: (416) 972-0307
  E-mail: hemont@hemophilia.on.ca
  Website: www.hemophilia.on.ca

- Toronto and Central Ontario Region, Hemophilia Ontario
  45 Charles St. East
  Suite 301
  Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1S2
  Tel: (416) 924-3446
  Fax: (416) 924-3504
  E-mail: tcor@wonline.com

- Ottawa and Eastern Ontario Region, Hemophilia Ontario
  2660 Southvale Crescent
  Suite 214A
  Ottawa, Ontario K1B 4W5
  Tel: (613) 739-3845
  Fax: (613) 739-3820
  E-mail: hemophilia.oeor@sympatico.ca

- Southwestern Ontario Region, Hemophilia Ontario
  388 Dundas St., Unit 120
  London, Ontario N6B 1V7
  Tel: (519) 432-2365
  Fax: (519) 432-9922
  E-mail: swor@golden.net

- Northeastern Ontario Region, Hemophilia Ontario
  P.O. Box 746
  Copper Cliff, Ontario PO M 1N0
  Tel: (705) 525-1335
  Toll-free: 1-800-220-5206
  Fax: (705) 525-2798
  E-mail: paul.mcneil@sympatico.ca

- Central West Ontario Region, Hemophilia Ontario
  1 Duke St.
  Unit 203
  Hamilton, Ontario L8P 1W9
  Tel: (905) 522-2545
  Toll-free: 1-800-267-8563
  Fax: (905) 522-0976
  E-mail: hemocwor@interlynx.net

- Québec Chapter
  Canadian Hemophilia Society
  625 Président-Kennedy
  Suite 1203
  Montréal, Québec H3A 1K2
  Tel: (514) 848-0666
  Toll-free: 1-877-870-0666
  E-mail: info@schq.org
  Website: www.schq.org
Hemophilia/Bleeding Disorder Comprehensive Care Programs

BRITISH COLUMBIA

• Lois Lindner, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Clinic
  c/o The Arthritis Centre
  895 West 10th Avenue
  Vancouver, British Columbia V5Z 1L7
  Tel: (604) 875-4017
  E-mail: llindner@vanhosp.bc.ca

ALBERTA

• Andrea Pritchard/Pat Klein, Nurse Coordinators
  Hemophilia Clinic
  Alberta Children’s Hospital
  1820 Richmond Road S.W.
  Calgary, Alberta
  T2T 5C7
  Tel: (403) 229-7311
  E-mail: pat.klein@crha-health.ab.ca
  andrea.pritchard@crha-health.ab.ca

• Wilma McClure, Nurse Coordinator
  Northern Alberta Hemophilia Centre, CSB7-109
  University of Alberta Hospitals
  Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2B7
  Tel: (780) 407-6588
  Pager: (780) 407-2605
  E-mail: wmcclure@cha.ab.ca

SASKATCHEWAN

• Cindy Olexson
  Bleeding Disorders Program
  Royal University Hospital
  103 Hospital Drive
  Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0X0
  Tel: (306) 966-7955
  Fax: (306) 966-7955
  E-mail: c.olexson@home.com
MANITOBA

• Nora Schwetz/Rose Jacobson, Nurse Coordinators
  Bleeding Disorders Program
  Health Science Centre
  Children’s Clinic
  840 Sherbrooke
  Winnipeg, Manitoba R3A 1M4
  Tel: (204) 787-2465
  E-mail: nschwetz@hsc.mb.ca rjacobson@hsc.mb.ca

ONTARIO

• Julia Sek, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Program
  Hamilton Health Sciences Corp.
  McMaster Division
  1200 Main Street West
  Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5
  Tel: (905) 521-2100 ext. 75978
  E-mail: sek@hhsc.ca

• Lori Laudenbach, Nurse Coordinator
  South Western Ontario Regional Hemophilia Program
  London Health Sciences Centre
  Westminster Campus, Room 4235
  800 Commissioners Rd. E.
  London, Ontario N6A 4G5
  Tel: (519) 685-8500 ext. 53582
  E-mail: lori.laudenbach@LHSC.ON.CA

• Carol Edwards, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Program
  Thunder Bay Regional Hospital/Port Arthur Site
  460 N. Court Street
  Thunder Bay, Ontario P7A 4X6
  Tel: (807) 343-6762
  E-mail: edwardsc@imail.tbh.net

• Ann Harrington, Nurse Coordinator
  Comprehensive Hemophilia Care Centre
  St. Michael's Hospital
  30 Bond Street
  Toronto, Ontario M5B 1W8
  Tel: (416) 864-5129
  E-mail: harrington@smh.toronto.on.ca

• Diane Bissonette/Pat Lesser/Diane Wattie, Nurse Coordinators
  Hemophilia Clinic
  Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario
  401 Smyth Road
  Ottawa, Ontario K1H 8L1
  Tel: (613) 737-2368 or 2470
  E-mail: bissonnette@cheo.on.ca

• Ann Marie Stain, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Program
  Hospital for Sick Children
  Hematology/Oncology Clinic
  555 University Avenue, Room 9208, Centre Wing
  Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X8
  Tel: (416) 813-5871
  E-mail: annmarie.stain@sickkids.on.ca

• Betty-Anne Paradis, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Program
  Sudbury & North-Eastern Ontario
  Laurentian Hospital
  41 Ramsey Lake Road
  Sudbury, Ontario P3E 5J1
  Tel: (705) 522-2200 ext. 3264
  E-mail:eparadis@hrsrh.on.ca

• Lucie Lacasse, Nurse Coordinator
  Regional Comprehensive Care for Adult Hemophiliacs
  Ottawa Hospital, General Campus
  501 Smyth Road
  Ottawa, Ontario K1H 8L6
  Tel: (613) 737-8252
  E-mail: llacasse@ottawahospital.on.ca

• Sherry Purcell, Nurse Coordinator
  Regional Hemophilia Program
  Kingston General Hospital
  76 Stuart Street
  Kingston, Ontario K7L 2V7
  Tel: (613) 549-6666 ext. 4683
  E-mail: purcells@KGH.KARI.NET
QUÉBEC

- Louise Baillargeon, infirmière coordonnatrice
  Département d’hématologie
  CHUS-Hôpital Fleurimont
  3001, 12e Avenue Nord
  Sherbrooke, Québec J1H 5N4
  Tel: (819) 346-1110

- Nathalie Aubin
  Centre d’hématologie
  Hôpital de Montréal pour Enfants
  2300, rue Tupper
  Montréal, Québec H3H 1P3
  Tel: (514) 412-4420
  E-mail: hnathalie.aubin@mmhc.mcgill.ca

- Ginette Lupien, infirmière coordonnatrice
  Centre d’hématologie
  Hôpital du St-Sacrement
  1050, chemin Ste-Foy
  Québec, Québec G1S 4L8
  Tel: (418) 682-7874
  E-mail: dsplupig@cha.quebec.qc.ca

- Claudine Amesse/Claude Meilleur, infirmières coordonnatrices
  Centre d’hémato-génétique—1er Vidéotron
  Hôpital Ste-Justine
  3175, chemin de la Côte Ste-Catherine
  Montréal, Québec H3T 1C5
  Tel: (514) 345-4931 ext. 6031
  E-mail: claudine_amesse@ssss.gouv.qc.ca

- Sylvie Lacroix
  Quebec Reference Centre for the Treatment of Patients with Inhibitors
  Centre d’hémato-génétique—1er Vidéotron
  Hôpital Ste-Justine
  3175, chemin de la Côte Ste-Catherine
  Montréal, Québec H3T 1C5
  Tel: (514) 345-2360
  E-mail: sylvie_lacroix@ssss.gouv.qc.ca

NEW BRUNSWICK

- Dorine Belliveau, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Clinic
  South-East Health Care Corporation
  135 McBeth Avenue
  Moncton, New Brunswick E1C 6Z8
  Tel: (506) 857-5465
  E-mail: dobelliv2@sehcc.health.nb.ca

- Carol Mayes, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Clinic
  Saint John Regional Hospital
  P.O. Box 2100, 400 University Avenue
  Saint John, New Brunswick E2L 4L2
  Tel: (506) 648-6784 ext. 7286
  E-mail: mayca@reg2.health.nb.ca

NOVA SCOTIA

- Sue Ann Hawes/Pam Cox, Nurse Coordinators
  Pediatric Bleeding disorder Clinic
  IWK Health Centre
  6TH Floor Ambulatory IWK Site
  5850 University Ave, P.O. Box 3070
  Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 3G9
  Tel: (902) 428-8752 or 8819
  E-mail: sueann.hawes@iwk.nshealth.ca

- Fran Gosse, Nurse Coordinator
  Hereditary Bleeding Disorders Program
  Victoria General Hospital Site
  Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre
  Room 5097, Dickson Building
  1278 Tower Road
  Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 2Y9
  Tel: (902) 473-4147
  E-mail: nmsfag@qe2-hsc.ns.ca

NEWFOUNDLAND

- Marilyn Harvey, Nurse Coordinator
  Hemophilia Program
  Janeway 2J755
  300 Prince Phillip Drive
  St. John’s, Newfoundland A1B 3V8
  Tel: (709) 778-4388
  E-mail: hcc.harmar@hccsj.nf.ca