

Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS)

What is POTS?

Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) is a form of dysautonomia, a disorder of the autonomic nervous system. It is characterized by an excessive increase in heart rate upon standing, often accompanied by symptoms like dizziness, fatigue, and brain fog. POTS primarily affects circulation and can impact multiple body systems.

Common Symptoms of POTS

Symptoms of POTS vary between individuals but frequently include:

- **Cardiovascular:** Rapid heartbeat upon standing (increase of 30+ bpm in adults, 40+ bpm in adolescents), palpitations, lightheadedness
- **Neurological:** Brain fog, difficulty concentrating, headaches, migraines, dizziness
- **Gastrointestinal:** Nausea, bloating, diarrhea, constipation, gastroparesis (delayed stomach emptying)
- **Musculoskeletal:** Muscle weakness, joint pain, tremors
- **Respiratory:** Shortness of breath, chest discomfort
- **Temperature Regulation Issues:** Heat or cold intolerance, excessive sweating or lack of sweating
- **Fatigue:** Chronic exhaustion, exercise intolerance

Potential Triggers for POTS Flares

POTS symptoms can be triggered or worsened by:

- **Dehydration:** Insufficient fluid or electrolyte intake
- **Heat Exposure:** Hot weather, showers, saunas
- **Prolonged Standing:** Especially in warm environments or confined spaces
- **Rapid Position Changes:** Moving from sitting/lying to standing too quickly
- **Stress & Anxiety:** Emotional or physical stress
- **Illness & Infections:** Viral or bacterial infections can exacerbate symptoms
- **Menstrual Cycle & Hormonal Changes:** Symptoms may worsen during menstruation or hormonal fluctuations
- **Inadequate Salt Intake:** Low sodium levels can worsen blood volume issues

What Does a POTS Flare Look and Feel Like?

A POTS flare is a period of worsening symptoms and can include:

- Increased heart rate and palpitations when standing
- Severe dizziness or near-fainting spells
- Extreme fatigue, making daily activities difficult
- Brain fog, difficulty concentrating, memory lapses
- Gastrointestinal distress (nausea, bloating, cramping)
- Feeling weak or shaky, particularly after physical exertion

Flares can last from hours to days, depending on triggers and management strategies.

Managing POTS

There is no cure for POTS, but symptoms can often be managed through lifestyle adjustments and medical interventions.

Lifestyle Modifications:

- **Hydration:** Drink 2-3 liters of fluids daily, including electrolyte-rich drinks
- **Increased Salt Intake:** 3,000-10,000 mg of sodium per day, as recommended by a doctor
- **Compression Garments:** Wearing compression socks or abdominal binders can improve circulation
- **Physical Activity:** Gradual, recumbent exercises like rowing, swimming, or cycling can improve symptoms
- **Slow Position Changes:** Transitioning slowly from sitting or lying down to standing
- **Temperature Regulation:** Avoiding hot environments, taking lukewarm showers

Medications:

- **Beta-blockers (e.g., propranolol, metoprolol):** Help control heart rate
- **Fludrocortisone:** Helps retain salt and fluids to increase blood volume
- **Midodrine:** Constricts blood vessels to prevent blood pooling
- **Ivabradine:** Slows heart rate without lowering blood pressure
- **Pyridostigmine (Mestinon):** Helps improve autonomic function

Dietary Considerations:

- **Small, Frequent Meals:** Prevents blood pooling in the digestive system
- **Balanced Macronutrients:** Prioritize protein, healthy fats, and complex carbohydrates
- **Avoid Triggers:** Minimize caffeine, alcohol, and refined sugars

When to Seek Medical Help

Seek medical attention if experiencing:

- Fainting or near-fainting episodes frequently
- Unmanageable heart palpitations or chest pain
- Severe dehydration despite increased fluid intake
- Persistent shortness of breath

POTS can be challenging, but with proper management and lifestyle adjustments, many individuals improve their quality of life. Consulting with knowledgeable healthcare providers is key to developing an effective treatment plan.