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The website for the answer to all your Orthopaedic Questions

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- **Patient information** is provided in the form of downloadable information sheets.
- **Orthopaedic advice** and second opinions can be provided by our expert internationally renowned Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeons.
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- **Book a clinical consultation** with one of our internationally renowned consultant orthopaedic surgeons in Bristol or London.
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Vasculitis

Key words: vasculitis, headaches, arteritis, inflammation

Vasculitis

This booklet explains what vasculitis is, how it is recognized, how it is treated, and what you can do to help your treatment. Although we do not know what causes the many types of vasculitis, there are treatments which can be very effective.

What is vasculitis?

Vasculitis means that the blood vessels are inflamed. When part of your body is inflamed, it swells and is usually uncomfortable or painful (although with many types of vasculitis you will not be able to see any swelling on the outside of the body). The term '-itis' means inflammation.

Blood vessels are the tubes which carry blood around your body. There are three types of blood vessel which can be affected by vasculitis:

- **arteries**, which take blood from the heart to various parts of the body – to organs such as the kidneys and liver, and to body tissues such as the skin
- **veins**, which take blood back to the heart
- **capillaries**, which are tiny vessels between the arteries and the veins where oxygen and other materials pass from the blood into the tissues.

Our body organs and tissues need a regular blood supply to work properly. If the blood vessels are inflamed, this can block or reduce the flow of blood. The wall of the blood vessel can also bulge – this is known as an aneurysm. An aneurysm can burst (rupture) and cause internal bleeding. The damage which vasculitis can cause depends upon which part of the body is affected – the bigger the blood vessel the greater the potential damage. And the more important the body tissue supplied, the more serious the damage will be.

What are the symptoms?

Vasculitis takes many different forms and the symptoms vary enormously from person to person. Many people with vasculitis feel unwell with fever, sweats, fatigue and weight loss. Other symptoms vary according to which part of the body is affected. Vasculitis in the skin causes a rash of spots which can sometimes rupture leaving open sores (ulcers). When vasculitis affects only the skin the long-term effects are not usually serious, and the symptoms generally clear up once the inflammation has settled. People with inflammation in their lungs may have a cough or be short of breath, while inflammation of

the nerves can cause pins and needles or weakness in an arm or leg. When vasculitis affects the kidneys it can cause problems passing urine and there may also be blood in the urine. Unfortunately, the symptoms of kidney vasculitis often do not appear until the kidneys have been damaged and have started to function less effectively. If the damage is severe, treatment on an artificial kidney (dialysis) machine may sometimes be necessary.

Vasculitis can appear suddenly in someone who has previously been completely well – doctors call this primary vasculitis. Vasculitis can also appear in people who have an established disease such as arthritis – this is called secondary vasculitis.

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