

NATIONAL HEMOPHILIA FOUNDATION

for all bleeding disorders

BLEEDING DISORDERS IN WOMEN: A FACT SHEET

- ◆ The most common bleeding disorder in women and girls is von Willebrand disease, an inherited disorder that affects up to 1-2% of the population. von Willebrand disease is caused by a defect in or a deficiency of a blood clotting protein called von Willebrand factor.
- ◆ von Willebrand disease is usually diagnosed by doctors who specialize in blood diseases; these doctors are called hematologists. The hematologist will conduct special blood tests and ask questions about bleeding and the bleeding problems of other family members.
- ◆ Symptoms of von Willebrand disease include heavy menstrual periods, frequent or prolonged nosebleeds, easy bruising, bleeding gums, and prolonged bleeding following dental work, surgery or childbirth. Although these symptoms are caused by a problem with the blood, it is frequently misdiagnosed as a gynecologic problem by doctors who are not hematologists.
- ◆ von Willebrand disease may also cause bleeding into the skin and from mucous membranes that line the nose and the gastrointestinal and genitourinary tracts. The gums are also made of mucous membranes.
- ◆ There is no cure for von Willebrand disease, but it can be treated. Minor bleeds may not need treatment, but for more serious bleeding problems (such as very heavy menstrual periods) effective treatments are available, including oral birth control pills.
- ◆ von Willebrand disease can also be treated with a synthetic hormone called desmopressin acetate. This prescription drug comes in an injectable form and a nasal spray. A hematologist should decide which form of the drug to use. This drug is also sometimes used to control enuresis (bed wetting), but the forms used to treat von Willebrand disease are ten times stronger than that used for bed wetting.
- ◆ In some people with von Willebrand disease, desmopressin acetate does not work. These people can discuss with their hematologist using a special kind of blood product called clotting factor concentrate that contains von Willebrand factor.
- ◆ Women and girls can also be born with other bleeding disorders. These conditions include factor deficiencies such as factor VIII and factor IX deficiency (hemophilia) and other clotting factor deficiencies (for example, factor I, II, V, VII, X, XI, XIII deficiencies). All of these conditions are rare, but they can be treated by a hematologist.
- ◆ Women and girls who are hemophilia “carriers” may have many of the symptoms of hemophilia, including joint problems. Women and girls who carry the hemophilia gene and have bleeding problems can be treated by hematologists.

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The National Hemophilia Foundation has many educational and informational resources for women and girls with bleeding disorders. For more information, visit the National Hemophilia Foundation's web site at www.hemophilia.org, or call us at 1-800-42-HANDI.

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