



FACT SHEET 2

von Willebrand Disorder (vWD)

What is von Willebrand disorder?

vWD (named after a Finnish doctor, Erik von Willebrand) is a bleeding disorder in which people do not have enough of a protein called von Willebrand factor in their blood or the von Willebrand factor does not work properly. Because of these problems, it takes longer for bleeding episodes to stop.

vWD is common but not well known. Symptoms may include frequent nose and gum bleeds, bleeding after dental surgery, easy bruising, heavy menstrual periods or severe bleeding after trauma or surgery. In some cases, bleeding occurs into joints and muscles.

Fortunately, most people with vWD have a mild form. Though they may realise they have a bleeding tendency, few will know they have a bleeding disorder unless a severe trauma is experienced. vWD can be easily managed, therefore knowing the diagnosis will improve the outcome in the event of an accident, trauma or surgery.

vWD is more common than haemophilia, affecting approximately 1% of the population, however many people will experience few symptoms. vWD can affect people of any ethnic background.

Inheritance

vWD is mostly a genetic disorder, and is passed from parent to child on regular chromosomes, rather than on sex chromosomes as is the case in haemophilia. Males and females are affected equally. There is a 50% chance of a parent passing a von Willebrand disorder gene to each of his/her children. Less often, two parents with von Willebrand disorder, but without symptoms, may together have children who are severely affected by von Willebrand disorder.

Diagnosis

If concerned you should speak to your doctor. If your doctor thinks you may have von Willebrand disorder you may be referred to a haematologist for blood tests.

Treatment and Management

Most people will not require medication if they have mild vWD except when they are having procedures such as surgery or dental extractions. Sometimes people may require treatment with synthetic hormones, or in the case of serious bleeding episodes infusions of clotting factor product made from human blood plasma which contains von Willebrand factor may be required.

More Information

For more information about vWD or bleeding disorders see your doctor or contact a haemophilia centre or Haemophilia Foundation Australia.

Haemophilia Foundation Australia, revised May 2006