



A Guide for Patients: Peripheral Artery Disease (PAD)



Peripheral Artery Disease (PAD) is the most common form of Peripheral Vascular Disease (PVD). PVD is a condition characterized by narrowed or blocked blood vessels outside the heart and brain, typically affecting the arteries that supply blood to the limbs.

Patients might be familiar with the terms heart attack and angina, which are related to a blockage of blood flow to the heart. That same sort of blockage can occur elsewhere in the body — depriving arms and legs of oxygen and nutrients. PAD affects 8.5 million Americans. Left untreated, PAD can lead to amputation.

Healthy peripheral arteries are free of blockages, allowing blood to freely provide oxygen, glucose, and other necessary nutrients. As people age, peripheral arteries build up plaque, a sticky substance made up mostly of fat and cholesterol. Plaque narrows the passageways within arteries and causes them to become stiff.

Symptoms

Pain in the legs (calves, thighs, or buttocks) or arms that happens when a person is active, but ceases when the activity stops, could be claudication. Vascular claudication is a condition characterized by pain, cramping, or discomfort in the muscles, typically in the legs, that occurs during physical activity, such as walking or exercise, and is relieved by rest. This condition is usually caused by poor blood flow to the muscles due to narrowing or blockage of the arteries, often as a result of peripheral artery disease (PAD). The insufficient blood flow during activity leads to a lack of oxygen in the muscles, causing pain and fatigue.

When PAD becomes more severe, the limb can be starved of basic nutrients. People with PAD might begin to suffer pain at rest (especially at night). Additionally, sores that won't heal may develop on the feet are symptoms of PAD.



Leg pain does not always indicate PAD. However, older people experiencing any symptoms should ask their doctor if they should be checked for PAD.

Causes and Risks

- Older Age
- Males are more prone to the condition than females
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Diabetes
- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- Obesity
- Lack of exercise
- Family history of vascular problems

Talk to a Doctor

Leg pain does not always indicate PAD. However, older people experiencing any of the symptoms above — especially those who are at risk — should ask their doctor if they should be checked for PAD.

People experiencing symptoms should seek an urgent referral to a vascular surgeon if they experience pain at rest — especially at night — or foot sores that won't heal.

Diagnosis

A simple, noninvasive ultrasound and leg blood pressure examination can diagnose PAD and determine its severity.

Role of a Vascular Surgeon

If you experience symptoms of PAD, ask your primary care physician to refer you to a vascular surgeon. Vascular surgeons can perform any necessary treatments, including medication management, minimally invasive procedures, and — if necessary — open bypass surgery.

Treatment

Treatment can include lifestyle changes such as smoking cessation and daily exercise, as well as medical management if necessary.

When the disease becomes more advanced, the limb can be starved of basic nutrients. Treatment is necessary to help prevent limb amputation and — in some cases — loss of life.

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