

"Ask A Doctor" article

What is PAD and why should I care?

Peripheral arterial disease, or PAD, affects as many as 12 million adults and is closely related to heart disease. Unfortunately, many people with PAD don't even know they have it. Worse yet, untreated PAD puts patients at increased risk for heart attacks, strokes, and death.

PAD, like coronary artery disease, is a condition in which the blood vessels fill up with plaque and become narrowed. PAD, however, typically affects the blood vessels feeding the legs, not the heart. PAD and heart disease share the same risk factors: smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, older age, and heredity. If you smoke or have diabetes or are known to have heart disease, you are particularly at risk.

The most common symptom of PAD is called claudication and is typically experienced as pain in the legs during routine exercise. The pain is usually in the calves but can involve the thighs or buttocks as well. Walking up and down stairs or more than a block may become difficult. Many people with PAD will learn to walk slower or take frequent breaks to control their symptoms. Pain is usually relieved with rest, although it may continue in severe cases. Wounds may form on toes or the foot and not heal. This can progress to gangrene and even amputation in rare cases if left untreated.

Diagnosis is relatively simple. If a pulse cannot be felt in the arteries of the legs, it could be because the arteries are filled with plaque from PAD. A simple, inexpensive and painless test can be performed with a blood pressure cuff called an ankle brachial index (ABI). If PAD is diagnosed, your doctor may order additional testing such as CT scans or laboratory tests or refer you to a vascular surgeon for more testing.

Initial treatment may involve managing risk factors known to worsen the disease such as quitting smoking or gaining better control of diabetes, cholesterol, and blood pressure. Your doctor can help you control these factors and may recommend a simple walking program to help grow new blood vessels to alleviate the symptoms of PAD. There also are surgical treatment options available such as an angiogram, which might involve ballooning and stenting the arteries back open.

If you have any of the risk factors or symptoms described, talk to your doctor today about getting tested for PAD.



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