Health Basics A-Z

Peripheral Artery Disease (PAD)

What is peripheral artery disease?

Most often described as poor circulation in the legs or lower extremities, peripheral artery disease (PAD) is a serious condition that more than doubles your risk of heart attack or stroke. PAD results when plaque buildup causes narrowing or blockages of the vessels of the legs or those leading to the heart or brain, which restricts the flow of oxygen-rich blood to those areas of the body.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 6.5 million people age 40 and older in the United States have PAD. The condition affects both men and women. African Americans have an increased risk of PAD and Hispanics have slightly higher rates of PAD compared to non-Hispanic white people.

What are the risk factors for PAD?

Risk factors for PAD include:

- Atherosclerosis
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Smoking
- Age 60 or older

How can I prevent PAD?

Here are a few ways to prevent PAD:

- Get plenty of physical exercise.
- Don’t smoke.
- Manage high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.

What are the symptoms of PAD?

Warning signs of PAD include muscle atrophy (weakness); hair loss; smooth or shiny skin; skin that is cool to the touch (especially if accompanied by pain while walking); decreased or absent pulses in the feet; sores or ulcers in the legs or feet that don’t heal; and cold or numb toes.

Symptoms of PAD include pain, cramps and a tired feeling or heaviness in your legs, thighs or buttocks when you exercise, even if just for a short period. These symptoms often ease after resting.

However, many people with PAD have no symptoms and may not notice any warning signs. As a result, many people are unaware they may be at risk for PAD

How is PAD diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose PAD with a physical exam or specific tests for the condition. One PAD test that is often used is called an Ankle-Brachial Index (A.B.I.) test. The 10-minute test compares the blood pressure readings from your arms and ankles, which are then used to calculate your A.B.I. number. An A.B.I. number below 0.9 may mean you have PAD. This test is recommended in particular for people over 50 who have diabetes.

How is PAD treated?

The following treatment options are recommended as effective ways to treat the condition:

- Exercise therapy
- Lifestyle modification
- Medication
- Diet
- Quit smoking
- Diabetes management
- Blood pressure management
- Foot care
- Endovascular therapy
- Vascular surgery

Talk to your doctor about which treatment option or combination of treatment options might work best for you.

For more information and resources on PAD, visit the American Heart Association.

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