

## Understanding Peripheral Artery Disease of the Lower Extremities

### What is Peripheral Artery Disease?

Whereas **coronary artery disease** involves the blood vessels within the heart that supply the heart with blood, **peripheral artery disease** occurs in the blood vessels outside the heart called peripheral arteries.

**Peripheral artery disease** (also known as PAD) is caused by atherosclerosis - a disease that involves the hardening and narrowing of the arteries due to a build up of plaque (fat and other materials) in the inner lining of the arteries. When enough plaque builds up inside an artery, the artery becomes blocked, and blood flow slows or stops altogether.

Slowed blood flow may cause **ischemia**, which means that the body's cells are not getting enough blood and oxygen to function properly.

Peripheral artery disease usually affects the leg arteries or the arteries in the abdomen and pelvis that lead to the legs.

In the early stages, there may be no symptoms. But as the disease progresses, people with narrowing in the leg arteries may experience a variety of symptoms.

### What are the symptoms?

#### **Symptoms:**

People with narrowing in the leg arteries may experience one or more of these symptoms:

- Numbness, tingling or weakness in the leg(s)
- Burning or aching pain in the feet or toes while resting
- Muscle pain in the thighs, calves and feet
- Sores on the legs or feet that do not heal
- Change in the color of the skin on the legs and/or feet
- Leg cramps that develop when walking and get worse with increased activity (a condition called intermittent claudication)

If you notice a change or worsening of any of these symptoms, contact your health care provider right away.

### **Who is at risk?**

People who are over 40 years old and people who have a family history of atherosclerosis, high blood pressure or high cholesterol are at risk for PAD. PAD is also more common in people who:

- Smoke
- Have high blood pressure
- Have high blood cholesterol
- Are overweight
- Have diabetes
- Have trouble managing stress

### **Your Treatment**

In some cases, treatment may be as simple as increasing the amount of exercise you do. Sometimes a procedure, such as angioplasty, or surgery may be needed to improve blood flow to the affected area.

### **Angioplasty**

A catheter (thin tube) with a balloon on the tip may be inserted into the artery and positioned in the blocked area. The balloon is inflated and deflated several times to press the plaque against the artery wall. Doing this leaves a wider opening for blood flow.

### **Stents**

A mesh device called a stent may be placed in the artery to help keep it open (after angioplasty) so more blood can get to the affected area.

### **Other Procedures**

Other procedures may be done to help improve blood flow to the affected area. Your health care provider will discuss other treatment options with you.

### **Bypass Surgery**

A blood vessel from another part of the body or a synthetic tube may be used to bypass the blocked artery. The transplanted blood vessel or synthetic tube, known as a graft, carries blood to the area beyond the blockage. This surgery requires a hospital stay. Bypass can treat the arteries in the abdomen or the leg.

### **Treated but Not Cured**

PAD cannot be cured, but it can be managed. Your health care provider will design a treatment plan to help you halt the progression of PAD, but there is a limit to what other people can do for you. You must take responsibility for your own health. Learn as much as you can, follow your treatment plan and know when to ask for help. Taking charge will reduce your risk of future health problem.

### **What Can You Do?**

Changes in lifestyle may be help to slow the progression of PAD.

- **Stop Smoking.** Stopping smoking now is the most important thing you can do to halt the progression of PAD.
- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is one of the most effective ways to treat PAD. Walking or biking may be recommended for people with PAD in the legs. Exercise only with your doctor's approval.
- **Change your diet.** Eat less total fat, saturated fat and Trans fats. Ask your health care provider for a list of foods that are low in fat.
- **Lose excess weight.** By reducing your portions, eating low-fat foods, eating fewer total calories and exercising regularly.
- **Control your blood pressure.** Ask your health care provider for advice on how to keep your blood pressure within a healthy range.
- **If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar within the recommend range.** Controlling your blood sugar will help you avoid heart and blood vessel problems.
- **Learn healthy ways to manage stress.** If you have trouble managing stress on your own, you may want to consider taking a stress management class.

**Keep in touch with your health care provider:**

Talk with your health care provider about your risk factors and your personal experience with peripheral artery disease. By talking openly and regularly with your health care provider, you can take an active role in your care.

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