

Title: Peripheral Artery Disease: The Silent Killer

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Plain Language Summary:

Peripheral artery disease (PAD) is caused by narrowing of the arteries in the arms and legs. This happens as people age and their arteries get damaged. Plaques made of fat and cholesterol form and decrease blood flow. Some people get severe pain in their legs when they exercise because of this. This is called “claudication”. Other people don’t have any symptoms. PAD occurs in as much as 20% of the population. It is most common in older people. It’s very common in people with diabetes, and in people who smoke. It’s a problem because it can cause a person to lose their limbs. It also increases a person’s risk of heart disease. And because arteries are everywhere in the body, it is a sign that blockage is happening elsewhere.

Screening allows you and your doctor to know if you have a disease before you have any signs. Doctors can screen for PAD in several ways. The most important thing is a person’s history. If a person smokes, or has diabetes, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol, that person is at a higher risk. If a person has leg pain when exercising, that person may have PAD. There are also several tests that can detect PAD. The most common of these is called an “ankle-brachial index” (ABI). This test measures the blood pressure in your arms and legs. It then compares the blood pressures. If there is a big difference, the person may have PAD. Screening is safe, cheap, and easy.

If a person has peripheral artery disease, their doctor may recommend several treatments. First, if a person smokes, they should stop. Second, a person should try to exercise on a regular basis. Third, their doctor may recommend several medications to treat health problems that can make PAD worse.

Screening for PAD is not for everyone. While many people have it, not everyone is at risk. People under age 50 usually do not get PAD. People without diabetes are at a lower risk, and people who do not smoke are at a lower risk. Finally, people without high blood pressure or high cholesterol are at a lower risk. But if you have leg pain when you walk, if you smoke, or if you have diabetes, and you are over 50, you are at risk. Ask your doctor if testing for PAD is right for you.

Additional Resources:

Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/peripheral-arterial-disease/DS00537>

American Heart Association

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/PeripheralArteryDisease/About-Peripheral-Artery-Disease-PAD_UCM_301301_Article.jsp#.TqSPmRUxrZk

American Diabetes Association

<http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/complications/peripheral-arterial-disease.html>

National Heart Lung and Blood Institute

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/pad/>

Peripheral Arterial Disease Coalition

<http://www.padcoalition.org/>

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Key Words:

Peripheral artery disease

Claudication

PAD

PAD screening

Ankle-brachial index

ABI

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