SCREENING FOR PERIPHERAL ARTERY DISEASE

Did you know that frequent leg cramps, leg pain when walking and slow-to-heal sores on your feet can be signs of a serious disease?

Peripheral artery disease, or PAD, occurs when there is a narrowing of the blood vessels (arteries) outside of the heart. Most frequently, PAD affects the arteries in the pelvis and legs, but it can also affect the arteries in the arms, kidneys and stomach, as well as the aorta, a major blood vessel that comes from the heart and supplies blood to the rest of the body.

PAD in the legs occurs when the leg arteries become clogged with fatty deposits that can reduce blood flow to the legs and feet, and, if left untreated, could result in amputation in severe cases. PAD can also be a sign that the same fatty deposit buildup is present in blood vessels elsewhere in your body, putting you at four to five times’ greater risk for having a heart attack or stroke.¹

According to the American Heart Association, peripheral artery disease affects 12 to 20 percent of Americans age 65 or older, yet only one-third of them have any symptoms.² A recently published study suggests that in 2010, more than 200 million people worldwide were living with PAD.³

Symptoms of PAD can include leg pain when walking; foot or toe pain that disturbs sleep; a decrease in body temperature in the lower leg or foot; sores on legs or feet that are slow to heal; a change in the skin color of the legs or feet; and slower hair and toenail growth. Often those who do experience PAD symptoms fail to mention them to their doctor, so their PAD is left untreated.⁴

One of the most common tests for PAD, an ankle-brachial index (ABI), is a simple, non-invasive test that can be done in a physician's office. In addition, other tests may include a review of your medical history to understand issues such as family history, diet and smoking habits—all of which can contribute to your risk of having PAD.⁵
Many patients are successfully treated for PAD by simply increasing exercise and adopting a low-fat diet. Some patients may also need to take blood pressure or cholesterol-lowering medications, or blood thinners. For stubborn blockages, a balloon catheter may be inserted through a small incision in the artery, navigated up to the location of the blockage and inflated to open the vessel. A stent—a tiny metal tube—may also be inserted in the catheterization procedure to hold the artery open. For the most severe cases, leg-vein bypass surgery or amputation may be necessary.

Speak with your healthcare provider about getting screened for PAD if you think you could be at risk.

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.