

Peripheral Arterial Disease of the Leg: Care Instructions

Your Care Instructions

Peripheral arterial disease (PAD) occurs when the blood vessels (arteries) that supply blood to the legs, belly, pelvis, arms, or neck get too narrow. This reduces blood flow to that area. The legs are affected most often. Fatty buildup (plaque) in the arteries usually is the cause of PAD. This buildup is also called "hardening" of the arteries. Your risk of PAD increases if you smoke or have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, or a family history of PAD.

Many people do not have symptoms. If you do have symptoms, you may have weak or tired legs, difficulty walking or balancing, or pain. If you have pain, you might feel a tight, aching, or squeezing pain in the calf, foot, thigh, or buttock that occurs during exercise. The pain usually gets worse during exercise and goes away when you rest. If PAD gets worse, you may have symptoms of poor blood flow such as leg pain when you rest.

Medicines and lifestyle changes may help your symptoms and lower your risk of heart attack and stroke. In some cases, surgery or other treatment is needed. It is important that you follow up with your doctor.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Do not smoke. Smoking can make PAD worse. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
- If you take a blood thinner, such as aspirin, be sure to get instructions about how to take your medicine safely. Blood thinners can cause serious bleeding problems.
- Ask your doctor if a cardiac rehab program is right for you. Cardiac rehab can help you make lifestyle changes. In cardiac rehab, a team of health professionals provides education and support to help you make new, healthy habits.
- Eat heart-healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, lean meats, and low-fat or nonfat dairy foods. Limit sodium, sugar, and alcohol.
- If your doctor recommends it, get more exercise. Walking is a good choice. Bit by bit, increase the amount you walk every day. Try for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. If you have symptoms when you exercise, ask your doctor about a special exercise program that may help relieve your symptoms.
- Stay at a healthy weight. Lose weight if you need to.
- Take good care of your feet.
 - Treat cuts and scrapes on your legs right away. Poor blood flow prevents (or slows) quick healing of even small cuts or scrapes. This is even more important if you have diabetes.
 - Avoid shoes that are too tight or that rub your feet. Shoes should be comfortable and fit well.
 - Avoid socks or stockings that are tight enough to leave elastic-band marks on your legs. Tight socks can make circulation problems worse.
 - Keep your feet clean and moisturized to prevent drying and cracking. Place cotton or lamb's wool between your toes to prevent rubbing and to absorb moisture.
 - If you have a sore on your leg or foot, keep it dry and cover it with a nonstick bandage until you see your doctor.

When should you call for help?

Call anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have symptoms of a heart attack. These may include:
 - Chest pain or pressure, or a strange feeling in the chest.
 - Sweating.
 - Shortness of breath.
 - Nausea or vomiting.
 - Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly or in one or both shoulders or arms.
 - Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
 - A fast or irregular heartbeat.

After you call, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.

- You have sudden, severe leg pain, and your leg is cool and pale.
- You have symptoms of a stroke. These may include:
 - Sudden numbness, tingling, weakness, or loss of movement in your face, arm, or leg, especially on only one side of your body.
 - Sudden vision changes.
 - Sudden trouble speaking.
 - Sudden confusion or trouble understanding simple statements.

- Sudden problems with walking or balance.
- A sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have leg pain that does not go away even if you rest.
- Your leg pain changes or gets worse. For example, if you have more pain with normal activity or the same pain with decreased activity, you should call.
- You have cold or numb feet or toes.
- You have leg or foot sores that are slow to heal.
- The skin on your legs or feet changes color.
- You have an open sore on your leg or foot that is infected. Signs of infection include:
 - Increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness.
 - Red streaks leading from the sore.
 - Pus draining from the sore.
 - A fever.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.

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