

September is PAD Awareness Month

What you need to know about Peripheral Arterial Disease, its symptoms and treatment



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September is PAD Awareness Month. PAD (Peripheral Arterial Disease) is a circulatory disease in which blocked or narrowed arteries reduce blood flow to the legs and feet. Approximately 50% of patients with PAD are asymptomatic, making early diagnosis challenging. Left untreated, PAD may result in the most severe form of the disease, critical limb ischemia. Pain becomes permanent, non-healing wounds occur, and tissue may die and loss of limb occurs due to lack of blood supply.

Tragically, within one year of diagnosis, 34% of patients with critical limb ischemia which is the most severe form of PAD, undergo amputation, many times before less invasive options, such as simple as x-ray imaging (angiography), have been utilized. Once amputated, the risk of death to the amputee within 5 years increases to 50%.

This disease affects 1 in 20 Americans over age 50, and 10% of the overall American population. Of the patients with known PAD, approximately 30% to 50% have coronary artery disease (heart disease) and 15% to 20% have carotid artery disease. Patients who have PAD are at a higher risk of coronary artery disease, heart attack or stroke.

What causes PAD?

PAD is caused by atherosclerosis which occurs due to accumulation of calcium, fat, cholesterol and other materials such as plaque deposits. These arteries begin to narrow and harden, ultimately reducing blood flow to the limbs. Plaque deposits in your arteries can eventually lead to complete blockage and severely reduced blood flow leading to condition called critical limb ischemia which can result in ulcer, wounds, gangrene, and even loss of limbs.

Are you at risk of developing PAD?

PAD Risk Factors

More than 95% of patients have one or more of the following risk factors:

- Being 50 years of age or older
- Diabetes
- Obesity and physical inactivity
- Smoking
- High Cholesterol
- High blood pressure

Diabetes is a major cause of PAD. Patients with diabetes have 10 times higher risk of amputation. Moreover, African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans with diabetes have significant high risk of limb loss.

How do you recognize symptoms of PAD?

In United States, 1 in 5 people over age of 65 are diagnosed with PAD each year. If you experience any of the following symptoms, take charge of your health and make an appointment with a PAD specialist today.

- Leg pain caused by walking and relieved with rest or pain in the legs at rest
- Pain, sores or wounds in toes, feet or legs
- Temperature lower in one leg than the other
- Poor nail growth on toes and decreased hair growth on legs
- A poorly healing wound of lower extremity (legs, feet and toes)

If you have already been diagnosed with PAD, we urge you to speak to a vascular specialist who can determine best treatment options to slow disease progression. Early detection and treatment have shown to reduce the risk of amputations and improve quality of life.

Understand Your Treatment Options

There are generally four common treatment options which include lifestyle changes/walking, prescription medicines, minimally invasive procedures such as removal of plaque, balloon or stent treatment and traditional bypass surgery. Learning about these treatment alternatives will lead to more informative discussion with your healthcare provider.

Here are a few lifestyle changes you can make to reduce symptoms from PAD:

- Quit smoking
- Change your diet
- Exercise regularly (ideally, walk daily)
- Eat heart-healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables
- Avoid high fat items

Sometimes lifestyle changes are not enough, and medications are prescribed. Low dose baby aspirin, cholesterol reducing drugs, medication for high blood pressure and high glucose constitute mainstay of prescribed drugs. If lifestyle changes and medications are not enough to reduce your symptoms, there are many nonsurgical treatment options available. If your doctor has not discussed some of these less invasive options, feel free to bring them up. Traditional surgery isn't always the best option, and depending on the severity of the disease, you may be better off with less invasive nonsurgical procedures. These procedures typically involve removal of plaque with laser or atherectomy devices, balloons and stents. They provide quicker recovery time. In almost all cases, these procedures can be performed in an outpatient setting and same day discharge.

Atherectomy procedure involves insertion of a catheter into the affected area. A small rotating blade or laser or diamond coated burr are utilized to cut or sand down plaque. Angioplasty involves a balloon catheter which expands the blockage to create a wider lumen allowing blood to flow normally. Stents are metal mesh tubes which are inserted into a blood vessel to keep the artery open. There is a wide variety of equipment available and a specialist in this procedure will choose the right option for you based on their experience.

In-hospital surgical procedures are not the most common PAD treatment alternative. In fact, surgery often can be the last resort, performed only for the most severe cases where lifestyle changes, medications and minimally invasive procedures have proved ineffective. It is important to understand that if you require surgery, it will require longer hospital stay and recovery. In author's experience, wide variation exists in the skill subset of different operators. Especially if you are recommended amputation, you should consider seeking a second opinion to see if some other options exist.

In summary, recognition of symptoms, seeking proper help to diagnose PAD early, improves quality of life and saves limbs. The second most important factor that affects long-term outcome is change in modifiable risk factors such as stopping the smoking, eating a healthy diet and addition of modest exercise in your routine. With increased awareness from campaigns like this one, our fight to prevent amputation will prevail.

Resources

Local Support Group for Patients:

www.thewaytomyheart.org/centralpa

Rajesh Dave', M.D., who has practiced in central PA for the past 21 years. Dr. Dave' is internationally recognized for pioneering innovative treatments, and authoring papers and book chapters to advance the practice of cardiac & endovascular intervention (opening blocked arteries). Doctors worldwide travel to the area to learn his unique techniques, and patients from around the world have been treated by him successfully when they were told there were no options.

