



Information for You from Your Health Care Team

Peripheral Arterial Occlusive Disease

What is peripheral arterial occlusive disease?

Peripheral arterial occlusive disease is a type of atherosclerosis, a hardening and narrowing of the arteries that supply blood to the arms and legs. In most cases, it affects the legs.

What are the risk factors?

Atherosclerosis is caused by a build-up of cholesterol and calcium deposits on the inside walls of the arteries. These deposits are called plaques. The plaques may in time become so thick that they completely block the flow of blood through the arteries. Smoking, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and genetic history all increase your risk.

What are the symptoms?

This disease is silent, without symptoms, until the arteries have become very narrowed.

- Leg pain when walking or exercising
- As the narrowing worsens, so does the pain.
- One or both legs may be affected and pain may also be felt in the thighs or buttocks.
- Pain usually occurs with exercise and quickly goes away when you rest
- Your feet may seem cooler than your legs.
- If you had hair on the top of your feet, you may notice some hair loss.
- Cuts and scrapes take longer to heal.

How is it peripheral arterial occlusive disease diagnosed?

- Examine by your health care provider who will ask about symptoms and medical history
- Pulses will be checked in your feet, legs, and groins. If your pulse exam is abnormal direct imaging with ultrasound may be done.
- Other special x-rays, such as an arteriogram may be required.

What is the treatment?

Not all blockages require a surgical procedure. However, procedures to improve your circulation may be required for major blockages. The treatment choices include:

- Removing the blocked portion of the artery.
- Creating a bypass using a piece of vein or synthetic material.
- Catheterization and balloon dilation.

If your disease is severe or surgery is not possible, amputation of a leg or foot may become necessary. Amputation is a last resort, but if peripheral arterial occlusive disease is not controlled, it is a possible complication.

How do I take care of myself?

Follow your health care provider's instructions on diet, exercise, and medicines. Do not smoke. See your health care provider right away if your symptoms become more severe or you develop a foot sore.

What can be done to prevent peripheral arterial occlusive disease ?

- Maintain all-around fitness.
- Reach and maintain a good weight, blood pressure, and reduced levels of fats and sugar in your blood
- Eat a healthy diet
- Exercise 3 to 4 times a week, as long as you do not experience chest pain or shortness of breath
- Be sure to talk with your health care provider before starting a more vigorous exercise program

Speak Up at Any Time if You Have Questions or Concerns