

Understanding PAD

Learn about peripheral artery disease (PAD) and what you can do manage it.

What is PAD?

PAD means blood is not flowing properly in your legs or arms. It happens when cholesterol and fatty deposits (plaque) build up in the walls of the arteries in your limbs, most often the legs.

It's also a red flag that you could be more likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke in the future.

How is it diagnosed?

Your care team can tell if you have PAD based on a few simple and painless tests.

They will look to see whether:

- Your pulse is not as strong as it should be in your legs/feet
- Your blood pressure is lower in your ankle than in your arm (called your ankle-brachial index and found with an ABI test)
- You have other medical issues that are often linked with PAD (for example, diabetes, high blood pressure or smoking)
- You are having symptoms such as leg pain or skin problems (for example, any redness, open sores or color changes on your legs or feet)

Things that make PAD more likely



Older age
> 65



Smoking



Having obesity



High cholesterol



High blood
pressure



Diabetes



Family history
of PAD

How will PAD affect my life?

Even if you don't have symptoms, PAD is a serious condition. Taking action now can help you avoid worse problems in the future.

- **PAD is often a warning sign for heart disease and stroke.** Having plaque in the arteries that supply your legs or arms with oxygen-rich blood means you probably have (or will have) disease in the arteries of your heart and brain, too. This can lead to a heart attack or stroke.



Work with your care team to stay on top of your heart health.

- **PAD can make it hurt to walk.** This makes it harder to do the activities that matter to you, like playing golf, traveling, shopping on your own, or enjoying time with the people you love.

Think of leg pain as akin to chest pain in someone with heart disease. Not all people with PAD have obvious leg pain – maybe it's just that your legs tire more easily, feel heavy or that you just can't walk as fast or as far as you once did.



Start a supervised exercise program to help you walk easier. Exercise is a key part of any PAD treatment plan.

- **PAD can cause you to suddenly lose blood supply in your limbs.** This is like a heart attack in your leg. It can result in amputation or death if not treated quickly.



Stick to your treatment plan to keep PAD from getting worse.

Signs and symptoms

Many people don't notice anything at first, but as PAD progresses you may begin to have symptoms.

Early stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Often has no symptoms• Can be detected during a clinician's exam or by performing an ABI test
Middle stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain/cramping in legs while walking but gets better when you stop• Fatigue or heaviness in certain muscles whenever you use them
Advanced stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain/cramping in your limbs while at rest• Cool or discolored skin• Wounds that don't heal• Sudden loss of blood supply, potentially leading to amputation or death

What can I do about it?

You cannot make PAD go away. But you can stop it from getting worse and take steps to prevent heart and limb problems.



- 1. Don't ignore it.** Being diagnosed with PAD can be an emotional experience, and you may be tempted to ignore it if you're not having symptoms yet. Taking action now will help you live longer and feel better. Your care team and loved ones are here to help.



- 2. Ask about starting a supervised exercise program.** This will help you walk more easily and hurt less. It can also help you avoid other forms of heart disease. Make exercise a routine part of your day.



- 3. Quit smoking or don't start.** This will help you avoid more deadly forms of heart disease. It's OK if you fail at first. Keep trying. Ask your care team about quit-smoking programs that are proven to help.



- 4. Keep your other medical issues under control.** It's very important to stay on top of diabetes and get your cholesterol and blood pressure to a healthy level. This will help stop your PAD from getting worse.



- 5. Stick to your treatment plan.** In addition to exercise and keeping up with other healthy choices, your care team might recommend several medicines or treatments. Many of these have the double benefit of helping with PAD while also helping to prevent or slow other forms of heart disease.

Your treatment plan might also include:

- Cilostazol, a medicine that helps open narrowed arteries and makes walking easier
- Cholesterol-lowering drugs, which help prevent plaque from building up in your arteries
- Blood thinners, which help prevent you from developing dangerous blood clots
- Surgeries and medical devices, which can help open blocked arteries so blood can flow better if medications and lifestyle changes don't work



- 6. Focus on you.** You are the most important member of your health care team. Speak up about your preferences and what matters most to you when it comes to your care.

If it's hard to stick with your treatment plan, ask for help finding ways to make it easier. You can do this!

If you think you might have PAD, use the worksheet "Could I have peripheral artery disease in my legs?" and share it with your health care team.