



Five Things You Need to Know About Peripheral Artery Disease

More than **10 million Americans suffer from peripheral artery disease (PAD)**, and yet many people don't know what it is or how to treat it. If left untreated, the disease that causes PAD (atherosclerosis) can cause serious and even life-threatening complications, including gangrene, heart attack, and stroke. Fortunately, PAD can often be detected through a simple, non-invasive test, and it is treatable. **Five things you should know about PAD.**

#1 What Is Peripheral Artery Disease?

- Atherosclerosis, the buildup of fatty deposits called plaque on the inside walls of the arteries (the blood vessels that carry nutrient-rich blood to our bodies), causes PAD. It is the same process that causes heart attack and stroke.
- Plaque can block the blood flow in arteries leading to the heart, brain, and peripheral arteries—those that lead to the arms, legs, feet, kidneys, and stomach.
- If you are at risk for PAD, you're also at risk for heart attack and stroke.
- When plaque reduces blood flow to the legs, you may experience pain, especially when walking.
- PAD can make it very difficult to walk.
- PAD increases your risk of infection and tissue damage, which can lead to amputation of the toes, feet, and legs.

#2 How Is Peripheral Artery Disease Also Dangerous to the Heart?

- Most patients with PAD eventually die from heart attacks.
- Plaque builds up in different areas of the body at the same time.
- As plaque accumulates in the peripheral arteries, it also builds up in arteries to the heart and brain.
- If you have PAD you may also have heart disease. According to the [National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute](#), people with PAD have a six to seven times greater risk of having a heart attack, stroke, or coronary artery disease, and patients with heart disease have a one in three chance of also having PAD.

#3 What Are the Symptoms of Peripheral Artery Disease?

- You may have very mild symptoms or no symptoms at all.
- Common symptoms are tingling, burning, or achiness in the calves, thighs, or buttocks during physical activity that goes away after a period of rest. You might not describe the feeling you're having as pain, but it is still important to discuss these symptoms with your doctor.
- Other symptoms are your legs or feet may feel heavy (like walking through wet snow), tired, or numb. You may also notice discoloration of or numbness in the legs or feet, and sores on the toes, feet, loss of hair on the legs, or wounds on the feet that won't heal.

#4 How Is Peripheral Artery Disease Detected?

- Your primary physician or a specialist, such as a cardiologist or podiatrist, can diagnose PAD.
- Simple, non-invasive tests can detect PAD.
- You may have PAD if the pulse below a narrowed section of your artery is weak or absent.
- You may have PAD if you have wounds that are healing poorly.
- You may have PAD if you have decreased blood pressure in affected areas of the body.
- Your physician may perform an [ankle-brachial index \(ABI\) test](#), a quick, painless, noninvasive test that compares the blood pressure in your ankle to the blood pressure in your arm using a traditional blood pressure cuff and a special ultrasound device.
- Additional tests include ultrasounds of the arteries themselves, CT or MRI scans or angiography, a test where a dye is injected into the blood vessels to view the arteries and see if blockages are present.

#5 How Is PAD Treated?

- Treatment for PAD depends on its severity. Discuss your options with your primary or specialty physician.
- Some people successfully treat PAD through lifestyle changes such as quitting [smoking](#), [regular physical activity](#) and eating a [heart-healthy](#) diet.
- Healthy lifestyle changes can help lower cholesterol and slow the progression of atherosclerosis.
- If lifestyle changes are not enough, your doctor may prescribe exercise and medications to treat and control cholesterol, blood pressure, blood clots, abnormal blood sugar, and PAD symptoms.
- In other cases, your doctor may recommend [angioplasty](#), possibly with the placement of a [stent](#), or [surgery](#) may be necessary to reopen or bypass the blocked artery and restore blood flow. Treatment options vary from person to person, so it is very important to discuss your options for treatment with your doctor.

Lifestyle changes and medications can go a long way in helping to manage PAD and reduce your risk of more serious complications. And, the same lifestyle changes that treat PAD, such as eating a heart healthy diet, exercising, and quitting smoking, will help the blood flow more freely through your other arteries, too, which can reduce your chance of heart attack and stroke.

Please talk to your physician if you think you are at risk for PAD. You can also print a copy of [Questions to Ask Your Doctor about PAD](#) to bring with you to your next medical appointment.