

Peripheral Arterial Disease

What is peripheral arterial disease?

Peripheral Arterial Disease (PAD) is when the arteries in your extremities (most commonly your legs) become blocked and do not receive enough blood or oxygen.

PAD is caused by the buildup of fatty deposits called plaque, which is made up of cholesterol, calcium and fibrous tissue. As plaque builds up your arteries harden and narrow, and this is called atherosclerosis. This plaque narrows the passageway of the artery constricting blood flow to the tissues of the legs and limiting needed nutrients and oxygen.

How is peripheral arterial disease diagnosed?

Diagnosis is made on the basis of your medical history and symptoms, starting with the pain and its location. If there are localized symptoms, our experts can develop a custom treatment plan for you.

Once diagnosed, PAD can sometimes be treated with lifestyle changes such as eating right and getting plenty of exercise or with medication. In more severe cases, further intervention may be recommended by your physician. We have the latest in technology and techniques to treat this disease, ease your pain and help you get back on your feet.

What are the symptoms?

When you have this disease, common symptoms include:

- Leg pain or discomfort when you walk
- Leg cramping in the thighs or calves
- Pain in your hips, buttocks, thighs, knees, shins or upper feet
- Pale or bluish color to the skin
- Erectile dysfunction

What are the risk factors?

Atherosclerosis affects many people, particularly males, and it can start as early as the age of 20. People who smoke or have a history of smoking are four times more likely to develop PAD.

The exact causes are unknown, but there are several contributing risk factors that accelerate the formation of the plaque in the arteries such as:

- Smoking
- Diabetes
- Older age
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol

Many of these risk factors can be addressed by lifestyle changes and regular medical care, reducing your risk of future painful problems and possibly slowing the plaque buildup and narrowing of your arteries.

What is the treatment?

Treatment is based on the symptoms, risk factors and physical exam. Treatments may slow or stop PAD, and include lifestyle changes (regular exercise, healthy diet and smoking cessation), medication, and procedures or surgery. Angioplasty and stents are often used to widen the artery, thereby allowing more blood flow.

The goal of any treatment plan is to ease symptoms; to improve the quality of life; to slow or prevent progression that lead to complications from permanent tissue damage; and to reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke.

Our highly-skilled radiologists provide specialty care for the treatment of PAD. Additionally, as members of an academic medical center, our physicians have direct access to every available subspecialty level of clinical care, including highly specialized diagnostic services.

What are angioplasty and stents?

Angioplasty is a minimally invasive procedure that consists of inserting a thin tube (catheter) with a balloon at its tip into the artery with the plaque. The balloon is then inflated to widen the narrowing by pushing back the plaque against the artery wall. The procedure will restore blood flow through the affected artery.

A stent is a small tube of fabric reinforced with a metal mesh. It is often placed in the artery during angioplasty and it is designed to remain in the artery. The stent provides a reinforced wall to hold the artery open after angioplasty.

VCU Health Interventional Radiologists use image-guided techniques to perform these minimally-invasive procedures reducing the need for lengthy hospital stays, so you experience a minimum of downtime and pain.

Call (804) 828-6986 for more information or to schedule a consultation.