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PERIPHERAL ARTERIAL DISEASE

SIGNS, SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENT

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Peripheral vascular disease is a common circulatory problem that involves the narrowing of vessels that carry blood away from the heart. Plaque, a substance made up of fat and cholesterol, builds up on the inside walls of the arteries and restricts normal blood flow. This buildup of plaque is called atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries.

Atherosclerosis can affect arteries anywhere

in the body. When it affects the arteries of the heart, it is called coronary artery disease and can cause a heart attack. When it affects the arteries supplying the brain, it is called carotid artery disease and can lead to a stroke.

People diagnosed with PAD can usually be treated with lifestyle changes, medications, minimally invasive endovascular procedures, or vascular bypass surgery.

Atherosclerosis in the arteries that supply blood to the kidneys, stomach, arms, legs or feet is called peripheral arterial disease (PAD). PAD affects eight to 12 million Americans. Prevalence of the disease increases with age and affects a disproportionate number of Blacks. Risk factors for developing the condition include smoking, diabetes, age, being overweight, and elevated

blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Smoking is more likely than any of the other risk factors to cause PAD. In fact, a smoker's risk can be three to five times higher than a non-smoker's.

If you have PAD you are more likely to develop other forms of cardiovascular disease. Compared to the rest of the population, a person with PAD is six to seven times more likely to experience coronary artery disease, heart attack, stroke or mini stroke.

One of the first signs of PAD can be painful cramping or fatigue in the legs and buttocks that occurs during activity, but stops during rest, also known as claudication. However, approximately half of people with the disease have mild or no symptoms. The condition also can cause leg numbness or weakness, cold legs or feet, skin color changes in the arms or legs, toe or foot sores that don't heal quickly, hair loss on feet and legs, and burning or achy feet and toes when resting.

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Recognizing the signs related to peripheral vascular disease

PAD
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or lying down. In advanced stages, blood flow to a leg or foot can be severely blocked, causing tissue death that may result in amputation.

Diagnosing PAD can be done through an ankle-brachial index (ABI) test which compares blood pressure levels in the ankle and arm. Angiography, a form of imaging that uses a dye injected into the blood vessels, allows the doctor to watch blood flow through the arteries as it happens. A medical history,

physical exam or ultrasound also may be used to diagnose PAD.

People diagnosed with PAD can usually be treated with lifestyle changes, medications, minimally invasive endovascular procedures, or vascular bypass surgery. Lifestyle changes include smoking cessation, diabetes management, blood pressure control, exercise and a healthy diet. Medications may be prescribed to lower cholesterol or blood pressure, control blood sugar (for diabetics), prevent blood clots or relieve

certain symptoms.

When the symptoms are more urgent or when these changes and medications don't work, minimally invasive endovascular procedures often provide very good results in opening up blocked blood vessels. Through tiny punctures in the groin, angioplasty uses balloons to open the vessels and sometimes tiny stents are used to keep the vessels open. This is an outpatient procedure where patients go home the same day and almost immediately enjoy relief from pain and

problems walking. Finally, vascular bypass surgery can also be done to bypass diseased vessels and facilitate blood flow, should the symptoms be very severe. As a doctor who diagnoses PAD through my own angiograms and performs angioplasty and stenting as well as major vascular surgery, I have seen many patients enjoy a much higher quality of life after receiving treatment.

Leg pain, numbness or other symptoms should not be dismissed as normal aches and pains of aging. Early diagnosis and treatment of PAD

is important to not only protect your legs, but also decrease your risk of heart attack or stroke.

North Shore Medical Center offers free community PVD screenings monthly. To make your appointment for a screening, please call 1-800-984-3434.

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