

SAVVY SENIOR

Peripheral arterial disease - do you have it?

Dear Savvy Senior,

Can you tell me about the vascular disease that causes leg pain? I've been having some problems with my legs hurting when I mow the lawn, although they feel better once I stop. I didn't think much of it because I'm almost 70 years old, but my wife has been doing some research on the Internet and thinks I may have a more serious problem. What can you tell me?

Hurting Henry,

Dear Henry,

You need to be screened for peripheral arterial disease (PAD), a serious condition that affects between 12 and 20 percent of Americans age 65 and older. Here's what you should know.

PAD Alert

PAD – also known as peripheral vascular disease (PVD) – is a condition that happens when the arteries that carry blood to the legs (and other limbs) become narrowed or clogged, usually caused by arteriosclerosis or “hardening of the arteries.” You also need to know that because arteriosclerosis is a systemic disease, people that have PAD are likely to have clogged arteries in other areas of their body, which can increase their risks of having a heart attack or stroke nearly six times.

Few Symptoms

PAD goes undiagnosed and untreated way too often mainly because most people that have it experience few, if any symptoms. The most common symptom however is leg pain, especially when walking or exercising but usually disappears after resting for a few minutes. Another reason PAD is underdiagnosed is because many people assume that aches and pains go along with aging and simply live with it instead of reporting it to their doctor. Here are some other possible symptoms to be aware of.

- Cold legs or feet.
- Numbness, tingling or weakness in the lower legs and feet, especially at night.
- Ulcers or sores on the legs or feet that won't heal.
- Color changes in the skin on your legs or feet

Are You at Risk?

PAD can happen to anyone but it is most common in people over the age of 50. Other factors that can increase your risks include: smoking, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, being overweight, physically inactive and if you have a family history of vascular disease, such as PAD, aneurysm, heart attack or stroke. If you have any of these risk factors – even if you don't have any symptoms – you should be screened.

Screening Resources

Next month, Legs for Life, a public education and national screening program will be offering free screenings nationwide (throughout September) to identify people at risk for PAD. Screenings will be performed by healthcare professionals using the quick, painless ankle brachial index test. Some sites will also be able to test for related diseases like abdominal aortic aneurysm and carotid artery disease that can lead to stroke. Screenings will be held at hundreds of

hospitals, clinics and senior centers across the country but require an appointment. To find a screening site near you, visit www.legsforlife.org.

If you can't find a free screening site in your area another good resource is a company called Life Line Screening, which offers PAD, abdominal aortic aneurysm, stroke and osteoporosis screenings for around \$45 per test. They have more than 45 teams that travel to more than 14,000 sites around the country each year. To find an upcoming screening in your area visit www.lifelinescreening.com or call 800-697-9721.

The Gerontology Research Foundation is another resource that offers low cost screenings at hundreds of locations nationwide. Call 877-854-4735 or visit www.healthscreens.net.

Treatment

With early detection, most cases of PAD can be treated with lifestyle changes, medication or both. For those with severe PAD, treatment options could be angioplasty (inflating a tiny balloon in the artery), clot-busting drugs or bypass surgery.

Savvy Tip: The Vascular Disease Foundation, a nonprofit educational organization, offers a free quarterly newsletter and information pamphlet covering PAD. To order your copies visit www.vdf.org/Resources or call 866-723-4636.

Send your senior questions to: Savvy Senior, P.O. Box 5443, Norman, OK 73070, or visit www.savvysenior.org.