



ABDOMINAL AORTIC ANEURYSM (AAA)

The Abdominal Aorta

The aorta runs down the center of the abdomen and is the main blood vessel that supplies blood to your body. The role of the abdominal aorta is to take blood from the heart and distribute it, via a network of branching blood vessels, to all of the body's organs.

“Aneurysms are a health risk because they can burst or rupture. A ruptured aneurysm can cause severe internal bleeding, which can lead to shock or even death.”

What is an Aneurysm?

An aneurysm is a bulge in a blood vessel that is caused by a weakness in the wall. In some people, as they get older, the wall of the aorta in the abdomen can become weak. As the blood runs through the weakened blood vessel, the pressure of the blood causes the blood vessel to bulge outwards like a balloon. If you have an aneurysm, you will not generally notice any symptoms. Because most AAAs do not produce clear symptoms, there is a high rate of sudden rupture with significantly high mortality rate.

A healthy abdominal aorta has a diameter of 2-3cm (one inch). If an aneurysm develops, the diameter of the aorta may increase. The increase in diameter weakens the walls of the aorta, increasing the risk of the aorta rupturing (splitting). AAAs vary in size. As a rule, once you develop an AAA, it tends to gradually get larger. The speed at which it gets larger varies from person to person.

However, on average, an AAA tends to get larger by about 10% per year.

A ruptured aortic aneurysm can cause massive internal bleeding and requires prompt emergency treatment to prevent death. It is estimated that 80% of people with a ruptured aneurysm will die, and that many of these will die before being able to reach a hospital.

Identifying Risk

Aortic aneurysms tend to be more common among older people who are 65 years of age or over. Each year, approximately 15,000 Americans die of a ruptured aortic aneurysm. When detected in time, an aortic aneurysm can usually be repaired with surgery.

What Causes an AAA?

The exact reason why an aneurysm forms in the aorta in most cases is not clear. Aneurysms can affect people of any age and both sexes. However, they are most common in men, people with high blood pressure (hypertension) and those over the age of 65.

Your genetic make-up plays a part as you have a much higher chance of developing an AAA if one of your immediate relatives (parent, brother or sister) has or had one.

Certain other 'risk factors' increase the chance of getting an aneurysm. These include: smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, emphysema and obesity.

How is an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Diagnosed?

An painless ultrasound scan is the easiest way to detect an AAA. It is the same type of scan that pregnant women have to look at the baby in the womb. The size of the aneurysm can also be measured by ultrasound. Sometimes a doctor feels the bulge of an aneurysm during a routine examination of the abdomen. However, many AAAs are too small to feel.

An X-ray of the abdomen (often done for other reasons) will show calcium deposits lining the wall of an AAA in some, but not all, cases.

A more detailed scan such as a CT scan is sometimes done. This may be done if your doctor needs to know whether the aneurysm is affecting any of the arteries that come off the aorta. For instance, if the aneurysm involves the section of the aorta where the arteries to the kidneys branch off then surgeons need to know this information if they plan to operate.

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Assessing the Risk

Surgery to repair an aneurysm is recommended when it is thought that the risk of the aneurysm rupturing is high enough to outweigh the possible risks associated with having surgery.

The assessment is usually based on five factors:

- the size of the aneurysm
- how quickly the aneurysm is growing
- your sex – for reasons that are unclear, the risk of an aneurysm rupturing is four times higher in women
- whether you have a first-degree relative who has had a ruptured aneurysm
- whether you have high levels of a chemical called MMP-9 in your blood – which can be caused by extensive weakening of the aortic wall

For More Information Visit:

<http://www.sirweb.org/patients/abdominal-aortic-aneurysms/>

<http://www.vascularweb.org/vascularhealth/pages/abdominal-aortic-aneurysm.aspx>

http://my.clevelandclinic.org/disorders/aneurysms/hic_abdominal_aortic_aneurysm.aspx

Screening for Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm

Currently, Medicare is offering a one-time, free abdominal ultrasound AAA screening to qualified senior citizens as part of its Welcome to Medicare physical. This physical must be conducted within the first 12 months of enrollment in Medicare. Men who have smoked at least 100 cigarettes during their lifetime, and men and women with a family history of AAA qualify for the Medicare screening.

Can I Do Anything to Stop the Small Aneurysm From Getting Bigger?

Here are some things you can do that may slow the growth of the aneurysm:

- eat a healthy, balanced diet and cut down on fatty food.
- if you are a smoker, stop smoking.
- make sure your blood pressure is normal. If you have not had it checked recently, it is worth getting it checked.
- achieving and maintaining a normal BMI below 25.
- get regular exercise. Gentle exercise such as walking and cycling are recommended to help to improve your overall level of fitness.
- if you have diabetes it is important that your blood sugar levels are well controlled.



Support From the Life Line Screening Community

Visit the Life Line Screening Facebook page to share your experiences. You may even pick up some handy tips from others looking to reduced their cholesterol levels too!

Sign up for the monthly eNewsletter online too for news, offers and useful info!

Please remember these are general guidelines only and you should always discuss with your primary care doctor.

Visit the Website:

www.LifeLineScreening.com

Make an Appointment:

Call 1-888-754-1464

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