

Exercise & Peripheral Artery Disease

By: CARL ENZOR, RN DIRECTOR, RENKER WELLNESS CENTER



Peripheral Artery Disease (PAD) is heard about more and more in the news lately. PAD occurs when plaque or fat build up in the blood vessel, thereby constricting the blood flow to the arteries that feed the arms, legs and some vital organs.

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), eight to 12 million Americans are affected by PAD. Many never experience symptoms. Of those who do, the most familiar are cramping and fatigue in the arms and legs. The symptoms, referred to as "intermittent claudication," generally disappear if the individual stands still or sits down.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES CAN OFTEN POSITIVELY INFLUENCE THE SYMPTOMS

If you smoke, QUIT. Eat a healthy diet that is low in saturated fats and low in salt. Exercise every day. The AHA recommends seven days a week to promote and build a healthy body. Watch your blood pressure. Increased blood pressure causes the blood vessels to narrow and decreases blood flow to the extremities. Control your blood sugar. If you have diabetes, your blood vessels are at risk for becoming brittle and narrowed. Learn ways to relax and reduce the pressure. Research shows that stress constricts blood vessels and decreases blood flow. Have you ever noticed your hands are cold and clammy when you are very nervous or under pressure?

Exercise is the best way to improve your symptoms. Once your physician has approved you to begin an exercise program, you need to decide what type of exercise you like and can tolerate. Walking is considered the best because it is weight bearing and it forces the blood down into the legs and pushes the vessels to expand. The cramping and fatigue occur because the blood backs up in the legs. Over time, exercise stretches the blood vessels and improves the symptoms.

This routine takes work and commitment, because it can at times become painful. Walk until you feel like it is just too much to continue. Sit down and rest. As soon as the pain goes away, stand up and keep going until it returns. For most people, 30 minutes is about right. Stick with it, and eventually the symptoms will decrease. You will be able to walk further, and you will find that your stamina has increased. Some individuals start by walking on a treadmill with a chair nearby for convenient resting. Do what it takes...and you will reap the rewards.

Other exercises help to dilate and expand the blood vessels, but are not nearly as effective as walking. Of course, if you have any unusual shortness of breath or chest pains, stop what you are doing and rest. If those symptoms occur, make sure to contact your physician or dial 911 in an emergency.

Some patients will not respond to lifestyle changes alone. They may need other modalities to treat PAD. Your physician may use medications, stenting or a catheter developed to remove artery blockages in the legs to open up the blood flow to the affected areas. If those avenues are recommended, be sure to still make healthy lifestyle choices. Exercise is the cornerstone of optimum health.

PAD SYMPTOMS INCLUDE: Leg cramps Cold legs Pain in the calves or thighs

PAD RISK FACTORS INCLUDE: Diabetes Smoking History of heart disease

Healthy Living is a publication of Eisenhower Medical Center · © Copyright 2015 All Rights Reserved · www.emc.org