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Atherosclerosis

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Atherosclerosis is a disease process leading to hardening and narrowing (stenosis) of your arteries. The buildup of fat, cholesterol, calcium and other substances creates plaques inside arteries, which can lead to serious problems including heart attack, stroke, amputation and death.

Serious, possibly fatal

Atherosclerosis-related diseases are the No. 1 cause of death in the U.S. for both men and women. Roughly 5 million people in the U.S. are affected.

Preventable—even small changes can help

Stopping smoking, following a healthy diet, managing cholesterol and staying physically active all decrease the risk of atherosclerosis and improve your overall health.

Symptoms

Until the arteries narrow significantly, many people experience no symptoms. Symptoms often appear only when the disease is advanced, and vary with the types of arteries affected.

Pain

Pain in the chest leading to angina or possibly a heart attack may indicate arteries of the heart are affected. Pain in the legs while walking may indicate arteries of the legs are affected.

Signs of stroke

A mini-stroke or stroke may occur if arteries of the neck are affected.

Causes

A variety of characteristics and behaviors called risk factors may contribute to atherosclerosis.



Some risk factors cannot be changed:

- ♦ Age
- ♦ Male gender
- ♦ Race
- ♦ Family history

Other risk factors can be managed:

- ♦ Smoking
- ♦ High blood pressure
- ♦ High amounts of cholesterol in the blood
- ♦ High amounts of sugar in the blood
- ♦ High levels of inflammation as the body responds to injury or infection
- ♦ Obesity
- ♦ Lack of physical activity
- ♦ Mental health issues
- ♦ Stress

Diagnosis

See a vascular surgeon

A vascular surgeon will ask questions about symptoms and medical history, including family history, and will perform a physical exam.

Blood tests likely, other tests may be recommended

The vascular surgeon will likely recommend one or more a blood tests be done.

Depending on the arteries affected or suspected, additional tests may be recommended to understand the presence and severity of disease. These may include:

- ♦ Treadmill test
- ♦ Ultrasound
- ♦ Computed tomography (CT) scan
- ♦ Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan
- ♦ Angiogram



Treatments

The vascular surgeon will provide information to help you understand the effects of atherosclerosis and may recommend changes in behavior or diet.

Medications may be prescribed, for example, to manage high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

If needed, surgery will be recommended and may include:

- Angioplasty or stenting
- Surgical bypass

Staying Healthy

Prevention is key to reducing the risk of atherosclerosis-related disease, primarily through lifestyle and dietary modifications that will improve your overall health.

- Stop smoking—ask your vascular surgeon to help you find a smoking cessation program that will work for you
- Improve nutrition through a balanced diet with reduced salt and fat
- Control blood pressure and sugar and cholesterol in the blood
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Manage stress
- Increase physical activity