

Vascular Health

Your heart has always been there for you – helping out with the decisions your mind wasn't equipped to make. So, isn't it time you started giving some of that love back? Your heart and vascular system need your undivided care and attention, and they need it now!

The state of the heart

America's hearts and vascular systems are in trouble. Heart disease and stroke, respectively, are the first and third leading causes of death in this country.¹ Heart disease alone is responsible for approximately 29 percent of deaths in the U.S.²

As we age

Your vascular system is your body's network of blood vessels, carrying blood to and from the heart – including arteries, capillaries and veins.³ Vascular disease primarily affects people aged 55 and older,⁴ but vascular problems are very common for all ages and can be life-threatening.³

What happens as we get older? Plaque and cholesterol build up in our arteries, thickening and stiffening them – narrowing the passage through which oxygenated blood can flow. This leads to restricted blood flow that can cause stroke, aneurysm, and loss of limb from circulation problems.⁴

Is my vascular health at risk?

Given the statistics, we all need to pay more attention to our vascular health. Below are some common risk factors to consider:³

- [Family history of vascular or heart diseases](#)
- [Pregnancy](#)
- [Illness or injury](#)
- [Long periods of sitting or standing still](#)
- [Any condition, such as diabetes or high cholesterol, that affects the heart and blood vessels](#)
- [Smoking](#)
- [Obesity](#)

If any of these apply to you, talk to your doctor about what you can do to steer clear of vascular disease. You may have to make some minor – or major – changes to your lifestyle.

The good news

You have the power to improve your vascular health and lower your risk of developing vascular disease. Here's how:

- **Stop smoking.** It's not easy, but you're worth the effort. Tobacco products deposit sticky plaque in our veins and arteries. They are the single most significant risk factor for vascular disease. Just remember that you don't have to quit alone. Reach out to friends, family, physicians and local support hotlines resources for guidance.⁵
- **Eat a healthy, low-fat diet and maintain good cholesterol levels.** Stock your fridge with fresh fruits and vegetables, and low-fat or fat-free milk and cheese. Control your portion sizes, and read food labels carefully when shopping to avoid foods with high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol.⁶
- **Exercise regularly.** Daily physical activity – even walking – can strengthen your heart muscle, lower your blood pressure, raise good cholesterol levels and lower bad ones, improve circulation, and increase your heart's working capacity.⁷

With a little common sense and a lot of hard work, you can make a dramatic difference in your and your family's quality of life – like being there for the big moments.

Common types of vascular disease

The three most prevalent vascular diseases are:⁶

- **Peripheral Arterial Disease (PAD).** The peripheral arteries in the legs become too narrow, limiting blood flow to the legs. This can cause pain; difficulty walking; foot pain while resting, which can interfere with sleep; sores or infections that won't heal; and, in severe cases, limb loss.
- **Carotid Artery Disease (CAD).** The carotid arteries in the neck become thick with plaque, resulting in strokes due to the restriction of blood flow to the brain, or from clots and bits of plaque breaking off and flowing to the brain.
- **Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA).** This occurs when the aorta, the largest artery in the body, weakens and begins to bulge. This bulge is called an aneurysm. It may continue to enlarge and eventually rupture if left untreated, causing severe internal bleeding and usually resulting in death.

Did You Know?

Research has shown that you'll gain about two hours of life for each hour of regular exercise you do. Even moderate exercise like walking counts.⁸

Resources

To learn more about vascular health and disease prevention, you can visit the following websites:

- VascularWeb, Society for Vascular Surgery:

www.vascularweb.org

and

www.vascularweb.org/patients/childrensactivitybook
(for children)

- Cleveland Clinic:

www.clevelandclinic.org

- American Heart Association:

www.americanheart.org

Visit anthem.com for more ways to get healthy – and stay healthy.

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Sources: (1) American Heart Association, "ABCs of Preventing Heart Disease, Stroke and Heart Attack," www.americanheart.org, accessed 08/12/08. (2) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Heart Disease," www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/index.htm, accessed 08/12/08. (3) U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, Medline Plus, "Vascular Diseases," www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/vasculardiseases.html, accessed 08/12/08. (4) The Society for Vascular Surgery, "Five Most Important Things Baby Boomers Can Do To Maintain Good Vascular Health," www.vascularweb.org/patients/prevention/baby_boomers.html, accessed 08/12/08. (5) The Society for Vascular Surgery, "Smoking Is A Major Risk Factor For Vascular Disease," www.vascularweb.org/patients/prevention/smoking.html, accessed 08/12/08. (6) The Society for Vascular Surgery, "High Cholesterol Is A Threat To The Entire Vascular System, Not Just Heart Vessels," www.vascularweb.org/patients/prevention/cholesterol.html, accessed 08/12/08. (7) MedicineNet.com, "Health Benefits of Physical Activity," www.medicinenet.com, accessed 08/12/08. (8) American Heart Association, "Start! Walking for a Healthier Lifestyle," www.americanheart.org, accessed 08/12/08.

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