

When Achy Legs Are a Warning

When Linda Molnar developed pain in her legs that got worse when she walked even a short distance, doctors initially attributed it to an old back injury. But three years and many doctor visits later, a vascular specialist finally gave her the correct diagnosis last fall: peripheral artery disease.

Often referred to as poor circulation, peripheral artery disease, or PAD, is a potentially fatal blockage of large arteries in the legs caused by the same kind of fatty deposits or plaque that can build up in the coronary arteries leading to the heart. Between eight and 12 million Americans have PAD, federal data show. By some estimates, those ranks could double in the next decade as the population ages and as diabetes and obesity—major risk factors—become more prevalent.

PAD has serious consequences. Patients have rates of heart attack, stroke and death equal or greater to those with coronary disease alone. A study of 68,000 patients in an international registry shows patients with PAD have a 21% chance of suffering a heart attack or stroke, being hospitalized or dying of complications within one year. That risk doubles for those who also have artery disease in the heart. PAD and coronary heart disease often go hand-in-hand: As many as 60% of PAD patients have both.

Several groups are lobbying the federal government to make a screening test for PAD more widely available. The test, known as the ankle-brachial-index, or ABI, can identify peripheral artery disease by measuring blood pressure in the legs. It is relatively inexpensive, ranging from about \$60 to \$117. Medicare will cover it only for patients who already show symptoms of PAD. The Peripheral Artery Disease Coalition of more than 50 organizations endorses ABI screening, and is lobbying the federal Preventive Services Task Force to review the test with the aim of getting it covered more widely by Medicare.

Private insurance policies vary, and some doctors may perform the test as part of a physical examination. About 10% of PAD patients have a severe form of leg pain, known as claudication. Caused by inadequate blood flow, it typically occurs while walking or climbing stairs and stops at rest. Half of patients may have other leg symptoms such as heaviness, fatigue and cramps.

"If people come in and say my chest hurts, that gets attention, but if they say my leg hurts when I walk a couple of blocks, most doctors don't think that is a big deal," says William Hiatt, professor of cardiovascular research at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and chairman of the American Heart Association's Peripheral Vascular Disease Council.

The first line of treatment for PAD is daily exercise and a healthy diet. Medications are also often used, including a statin to lower cholesterol, blood thinners, blood-pressure medications and a drug called Pletal that helps expand arteries and relieve leg pain.

It Pays To Stay Active

Do things that challenge your creativity and make you feel productive, whether or not you get paid for it – things like gardening, drawing, writing, playing an instrument, or building something in your workshop.

Enjoy Life

Do things for no other reason than that it feels good to do them. Go to a funny movie, take a walk on the beach, listen to music, read a good book, or talk to a friend. Doing things just because they are fun is no indulgence. Play is an emotional and mental health necessity.

Laugh, He Who Laughs Lasts

Get outside to play with the kids. Take the family ice skating. Play a game of tag. Ride your bike. Take a walk and go see your friends. Invite them along. And laugh -- laughing is a great tension reliever. It burns calories, reduces stress and makes you feel better all around.

Healthy Video Games?

Who says video games are bad for you? The Nintendo Wii gaming system is a high-tech option with new games that get you and your family off the couch and working up a sweat. Visit eniweb.com/everyday-wellness and enter to win the Nintendo Wii system, including the popular Wii Sport game. One in 100 qualified entries will win. One entry per person.

Seminar

What you need to know about Hormone Replacement

Dr. Addison Livingston is conducting a Seminar on Bioidentical Hormone Replacement Therapy

Dr. Livingston has in-depth knowledge of Hormone Replacement and is considered one of the leading authorities in the Midlands. Addison Livingston will be sharing his knowledge and recommendations at the seminar. It's free, so it is sure to fill up quickly. Call today to register 791-2113.

Tuesday, February 15, 2011 @ 6:30 pm
Lexington Medical Center's Health Directions Building
3225 Sunset Blvd., West Columbia, SC