



ATHEROSCLEROSIS



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A hardening or narrowing of the arteries. Arteries are blood vessels that carry blood and oxygen to the heart, brain, and other body parts. Atherosclerosis can begin in childhood and progress slowly as people age. In some people, it progresses more rapidly. Up to age 45, it is more common in men. After menopause, women are as equally affected as men are. Atherosclerosis is an underlying medical problem that can lead to:

- Coronary artery disease.
- Stroke.
- Abdominal angina (pain) and bowel infarction (blood clot in the intestines).
- Atherosclerosis of the extremities. Legs get reduced blood flow, which leads to intermittent claudication.
- Other conditions, such as aortic aneurysm.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Symptoms often are absent until atherosclerosis reaches advanced stages. Symptoms depend on what part of the body has a decreased blood flow and the extent of disease.
- Muscle cramps if it involves blood vessels in the legs.
- Angina pectoris (chest pain) or a heart attack if it involves blood vessels to the heart.
- Stroke or transient ischemic attack if it involves vessels to the neck and brain.
- Abdominal cramps or pain if blood vessels to the abdomen are involved.

CAUSES

Plaque is made up of cholesterol, muscle cells, fibrous tissue, and calcium. It builds up on artery walls that have been damaged in some way. Plaque deposits can grow large enough to reduce blood flow. Plaques can also crack or break apart and form clots. Clots can block blood flow or travel to another part of the body and cause serious or fatal problems.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- High blood pressure.
- High levels of LDL (the bad cholesterol).
- Low levels of HDL (the good cholesterol).
- Diabetes.
- Obesity.
- Sedentary lifestyle (lack of physical activity).
- Smoking.
- Family history of atherosclerosis.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Don't smoke.
- Eat a healthy, low-fat, high-fiber diet. Maintain a healthy weight. Exercise regularly.
- Control diabetes and high blood pressure.
- Control cholesterol levels.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

There is no cure, but atherosclerosis can be slowed or stopped. If organ damage has developed due to reduced blood flow, the outcome will vary.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Coronary artery disease, which is the number one cause of death in men and women.
- Other disorders as listed in Description.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider may do a physical exam. Questions will be asked about your symptoms, smoking, alcohol use, drug use, exercise, and personal and family medical history. Blood pressure and pulse rate are checked. A stethoscope is used to listen for sounds of blood flow in the arteries. Blood studies are done for cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood sugar. Heart function tests and blood flow tests may be done.
- Atherosclerosis treatment includes drug therapy and lifestyle changes. Treatment for organ damage caused by atherosclerosis depends on the organ involved.
- Lifestyle changes include diet changes, losing weight, stopping smoking, and increasing exercise.
- Stop smoking. Find a way to quit that works for you.
- To learn more: American Heart Association, local branch listed in telephone directory, or call (800) 242-8721; website: www.americanheart.org.

MEDICATIONS

- Drugs will be prescribed for any diagnosed disorders.
- Cholesterol-lowering drugs are usually prescribed.

ACTIVITY

Activity may depend on general state of health. Try to get 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise at least three times a week.

DIET

Eat a low-fat, high-fiber diet that includes fruits and vegetables. Begin a weight loss diet, if overweight.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

You or a family member has symptoms of, or concerns about, atherosclerosis.

