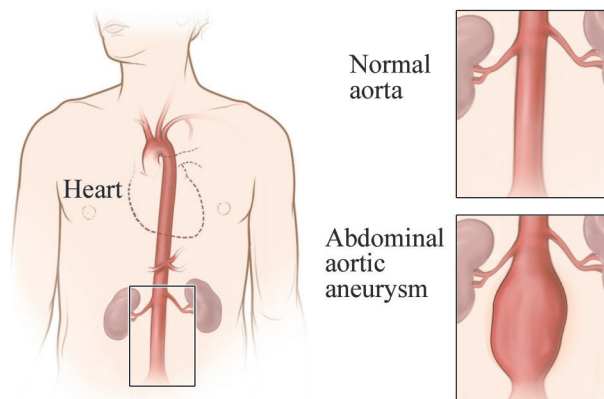


Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm



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An abdominal aortic aneurysm is a bulge in the belly part of the aorta. The aorta is one of the body's main arteries. It carries oxygen-rich blood from the heart to the rest of the body. The abdominal aorta carries blood to the lower body.

The wall of the aorta is normally very elastic. It can stretch and then shrink back as needed to adapt to blood flow. But some medical problems, such as high blood pressure and atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), weaken the artery walls. These problems, along with the wear and tear that naturally occurs with aging, can result in a weak aortic wall that bulges outward.

Most aortic aneurysms never cause problems, especially if they're small and don't grow fast. But if the bulge gets too big, it can burst, or rupture.

How is it diagnosed?

An abdominal aortic aneurysm is often diagnosed by chance during exams or tests done for other reasons. In some cases, it's found during a screening test for this type of aneurysm. If your doctor thinks you have an aortic

aneurysm, you may have tests such as an ultrasound, a CT scan, or an MRI to find out how big it is.

Experts recommend that men ages 65 to 75 who have ever smoked be screened for an abdominal aortic aneurysm. Others also recommend screening for anyone age 60 and older who has a close relative (a parent, brother, or sister) who has had this type of aneurysm.

What are the symptoms?

Most abdominal aortic aneurysms don't cause symptoms. People who do have symptoms complain of belly pain or discomfort. These symptoms may come and go or be constant.

Other symptoms include:

- Pain in the chest, belly, lower back, or flank (the side of the back just below the rib cage and above the waist). The pain may spread to the groin, buttocks, or legs. It may be deep, aching, gnawing, and/or throbbing. The pain may last for hours or days. It is generally not affected by movement, although certain positions may be more comfortable than others.
- A pulsating sensation in the belly.
- A cold foot or a black or blue painful toe. This can happen if an aortic aneurysm produces a blood clot that breaks off and blocks blood flow to the legs or feet.
- Fever or weight loss, if it is an inflammatory aortic aneurysm.

If an aortic aneurysm bursts, or ruptures, it can cause sudden, severe pain and bleeding. This often leads to death within minutes to hours.

What increases your risk?

Some people are more likely to have an abdominal aortic aneurysm than others.

You may be at higher risk if:

- You are older.
- You are a man.
- You have high blood pressure.
- Someone in your family (a parent, brother, or sister) has had an aortic aneurysm.
- You smoke or have ever smoked.
- You drink alcohol (more than 2 drinks a day).

How is it treated?

If you have an abdominal aortic aneurysm, you need close medical monitoring and may need treatment. Talk with your doctor about how often you should come in for testing. The focus of treatment is to help prevent or control conditions that may be causing you to have an aortic aneurysm, such as atherosclerosis or high blood pressure.

Treatment is based on how big the aortic aneurysm is and how fast it is growing. If you have a large or fast-growing one, you need surgery to fix it. A doctor will repair the damaged part of the blood vessel with a stent or replace it with a graft during open surgery.

Small aortic aneurysms rarely rupture and are usually treated with high blood pressure medicine, such as beta-blockers. This medicine helps to lower blood pressure and stress on the aortic wall. If you don't have surgery, you will

have routine ultrasound tests to see if the aneurysm is getting bigger.

Even if your aortic aneurysm does not grow or rupture, you may be at risk for heart problems. Your doctor may suggest that you exercise more, eat a heart-healthy diet, stop smoking, limit how much alcohol you drink, and maintain a healthy weight. He or she may also prescribe medicines to help lower high cholesterol.

When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have severe pain in your belly, back, or chest.
- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You have severe trouble breathing.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You are dizzy or lightheaded, or you feel like you may faint.
- One or both feet change color, are painful, feel cool, or burn or tingle.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.