



Your guide to

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm

An essential component of effectively managing and treating a disease is understanding the nature of the condition. Your physician has diagnosed abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA), a weakened area located in the abdominal aorta, the body's largest artery. A bulge, called an aneurysm, develops at this weakened area.



About abdominal aortic aneurysm

Abdominal aortic aneurysm is a bulge or swelling that occurs in a weakened area of the aorta in the abdomen. The aorta is the largest blood vessel, supplying blood to all the organs in the body. While an aneurysm may occur in any blood vessel in the body, the most common location is in the abdomen, just below the kidneys and above the area where the artery separates to bring blood to the pelvis and legs. As blood flows through the aorta, the aneurysm swells like a balloon. And, like a balloon, the aneurysm can burst or rupture if it gets too big.

AAA is often undiagnosed, and potentially fatal. In the United States, AAA affects approximately 5 to 7 percent of the population over age 60, causing some 150,000 deaths annually.

If you have questions about your condition, please consult your physician. For additional information about AAA, contact Lutheran General Hospital's Cardiovascular Risk Reduction Center (CRRC) at 847-723-3008.

Risk factors for AAA

AAA occurs most often in individuals over the age of 60, and men are four times more likely to have AAA as women.

Other contributing factors to AAA include:

- Family history
- Smoking
- Arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries)
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure

Diagnosing AAA

Early detection of AAA, prior to the onset of any symptoms, is essential. Individuals with risk factors should discuss testing options with their physician.

Often, an AAA can be diagnosed during a thorough physical examination. The physician may be able to detect abnormal blood flow by using a stethoscope to listen to sounds in the abdomen. In addition, by gently probing and pressing on the abdomen, the physician may be able to feel a larger aneurysm. There are also a number of tests used to detect an aneurysm.

These tests include:

Ultrasound

Ultrasound is a safe, painless procedure capable of detecting even very small aneurysms that cannot be detected by physical examination. A small device called a transducer is passed over the abdomen collecting sound waves to create a computerized picture of the aorta.

Computerized Tomography (CT)

With CT, a special dye is injected into the blood vessel and computerized X-rays of the aorta are taken.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)

MRI uses radio waves and magnetic energy to create a computerized picture of the aorta.

Symptoms of AAA

In most cases, there are no warning signs or symptoms of AAA, thus it is often referred to as a “silent killer.”

When present, these symptoms suggest that the AAA is about to rupture:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Pain in the lower back that extends to the buttocks, groin or legs
- A pulsing or beating sensation in the abdomen
- Fatigue
- A soft mass in the abdomen

If an aneurysm grows quickly or ruptures, severe symptoms will develop suddenly and immediate emergency medical treatment is imperative.

These symptoms include:

- Sudden, severe pain
- Shaking, dizziness, fainting, sweating, clammy skin, and/or paleness
- Rapid heart rate
- Dry mouth and/or excessive thirst
- Nausea and vomiting
- Sudden weakness
- Anxiety

Treatment options for AAA

A small aneurysm may not require any treatment, aside from regular monitoring and testing to ensure that it does not grow. However, if an aneurysm reaches a certain size or grows rapidly, it will need to be repaired to prevent it from rupturing. In most cases, if an AAA grows to two inches it will need to be repaired.

Based on the individual's overall health and the size and nature of the aneurysm, two treatment options for repairing AAA are used: *open surgery and endovascular repair*.

Open Surgery

Open surgery requires a large incision into the abdomen. The surgeon replaces the aneurysm with a vascular graft, which is a synthetic cloth tube that is placed inside the site of the aneurysm, preventing the blood from flowing through the aneurysm.

Endovascular Repair

With endovascular repair, an incision is made in the groin and a catheter or small tube is inserted and threaded to the site of the aneurysm using X-ray imaging. A vascular graft is inserted through the catheter and placed inside the aneurysm.

If you have AAA

If you experience symptoms associated with AAA or have risk factors contributing to AAA, talk with your physician about Lutheran General Hospital's state-of-the-art Cardiovascular Risk Reduction Center and Vascular Clinic. The Vascular Clinic offers comprehensive diagnostic services and the expertise of skilled vascular surgeons, cardiologists and interventional radiologists. This team of experts works with your physician to offer the most appropriate and effective treatment options available.

The CRRC is open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, and is located across the street from Lutheran General Hospital.



For more information about
Lutheran General
Hospital's Cardiovascular
Risk Reduction Center
or to make an appointment,
call 847-723-3008.

 *Advocate Lutheran General Hospital*
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