Understanding Vascular Disease

Vascular disease is a condition where there is a problem with blood flow and circulation in the body. The vascular system, also called the circulatory system, is made up of vessels that carry blood and lymph throughout the body. Normal blood flow transports blood to and from areas of the body without interruption. Lymph gets rid of waste products in your cells, helping the body to fight infection.

With vascular disease, there may be problems in veins, arteries, or lymph:

- **Arteries:** Carry blood full of oxygen and nutrients from the heart and lungs to all other areas of the body.
- **Veins:** Return the blood that has waste products from all parts of the body back to the heart and lungs.
- **Lymph vessels and nodes:** Vessels that carry lymph to all parts of the body. Nodes are small glands that can be felt in the armpit, groin, neck, under the jaw and chin, and behind the ears.

Your risk for vascular disease

Many people are at risk for vascular disease, depending on their health, lifestyle behaviors, and family history. Common risk factors include:

- Being age 45 years or older
- A self or family history of Coronary Artery Disease (CAD)
- A family history of vascular disease
- A sedentary lifestyle and/or poor diet
- Tobacco use
- Having high cholesterol or lipids
- Having high blood pressure
- Having diabetes
- Being overweight

Types of vascular disease

The disease may be called other names, based on the body system affected:

- **Atherosclerosis or hardening of arteries:** Plaque builds up on the lining of arteries limiting blood flow. As the blood vessel narrows, it is harder for oxygen-rich blood to flow.

- **Peripheral Artery, Peripheral Vein, or Renal Artery Disease:** The peripheral arteries and veins are those blood vessels that are located outside of your heart. You may hear the terms PAD or PVD to describe where arteries or veins are blocked with plaque. If the artery to the kidney is blocked, it is called renal artery disease.
• **Carotid Artery Disease:** Arteries on either side of the neck are blocked from plaque, or there may be a blood clot.

• **Blood Clots:** Blood clots can occur when there is prolonged bed rest or lack of movement, damage to veins from injury, infection, or other conditions that cause slow blood flow.
  ‣ **Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)** is a serious condition where the clot is in a deep vein of the chest, pelvis, or leg.

• **Aneurysm:** A weak part of a blood vessel wall that swells and bulges out, limiting blood flow. Aneurysm is more likely to occur in the aorta (heart), abdomen, or kidneys.

**Other vascular problems**

• **Lymphedema:** Swelling in the body from problems with draining lymph.

• **Varicose and Spider Veins:** A vein will swell when the valves inside the vein do not work well to regulate blood flow. Varicose veins are enlarged and can appear twisted or bulging. Spider veins are like varicose veins, but smaller and closer to the surface.

• **Buerger’s Disease:** Leads to blocked veins in the arms and legs causing low blood supply to the hands and fingers or feet and toes.

• **Raynaud's Disease:** Skin of the hands or feet may be white or bluish and feel numb or cold. This usually occurs when it is cold out.

**Signs**

In the early stages, you may not have any signs of vascular disease. If you are not being treated for it, you may have the following signs of poor circulation over time:

• Pain, called **claudication**, in your leg or foot, that happens while walking or during exercise. While pain may stop at rest, some people report muscle spasms and pain in advanced vascular disease.

• Feel dizzy, faint, or have a headache.

• Feel numb or lose muscle control where circulation is poor. It is more common in the arms, legs, muscles of the face, or one side of the body.

• Cool, pale skin, or cold hands and feet.

• Skin color under nails of fingers and toes may be reddish-blue, especially when legs are down or lower than the heart.

• Trouble speaking.

• Sores or wounds that take a long time to heal or look dark (black) in color.

• Loss of hair on legs and feet.

• Weak pulse in the legs and/or feet.

**Testing and treatment**

If you have one or more of these signs, see your healthcare provider. Tests may be done to find out the cause of your problem and options for treatment. Treatment types for vascular disease include lifestyle changes, medicines, and surgery.