

Vascular Surgery

Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA)

What is the aorta?

The aorta is the main blood vessel (artery) that carries blood from the heart down through the chest and into your tummy (abdomen).

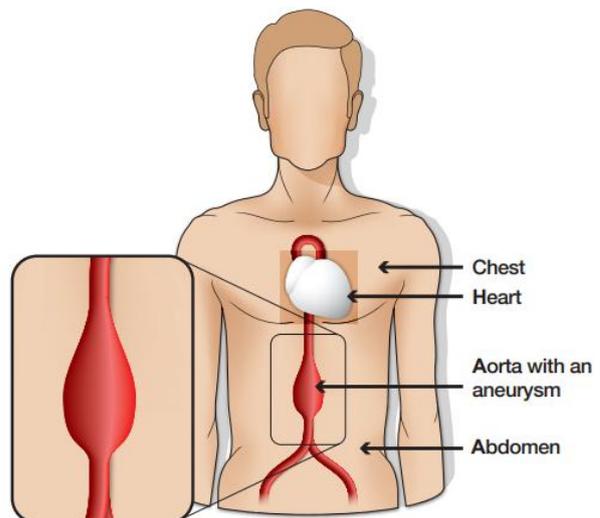
It has many branches that supply blood to major organs and other parts of the body. Around the level of the belly button, it divides into the arteries that go to the legs. A normal aorta usually measures between 1.5cm and 2.5cm across.

What is an aneurysm?

An aneurysm is a ballooning or widening of an artery, which causes the artery wall to stretch and weaken.

Aneurysms can happen in any artery but are most common in the tummy area (abdomen), where they are called Abdominal Aortic Aneurysms (AAA).

An abdominal aneurysm is diagnosed when the aorta in this area measures 3 cm or more across.



Patient Information

Why have you got this?

The exact reason of an AAA is not clear. They grow over many years without symptoms.

Aneurysms can affect both men and women, usually starting around middle age. However, they are more common in:

- men (over 65 years)
- people who smoke
- people with high blood pressure (hypertension)
- people with high cholesterol.

Other risk factors include high cholesterol, obesity, family history (close relatives with AAA) and peripheral vascular disease.

How are they detected?

Many aneurysms are found by chance during routine checks or scans for other reasons. There is a National AAA Screening Programme for men aged 65 and over, as men are 6 times more likely to have this condition.

Screening and monitoring of AAA is done using an ultrasound scan, which is a quick and painless outpatient test. Once an aneurysm is diagnosed, you be regularly monitored.

How often you will need checks depends on the size of your aneurysm. The healthcare professional caring for you will talk to you about this. If your aneurysm grows to 5.5cm, you will be referred to a vascular surgeon for ongoing management.

Symptoms

Most AAAs **don't cause any symptoms**. If symptoms do occur, they may include:

- A pulsing feeling, like a heartbeat (in your tummy)
- A persistent tummy, back or side pain

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- Sudden, severe pain in your tummy (abdomen) or back. (This could mean the aneurysm has burst; call 999 immediately. Do not drive to the hospital.

Do not drive yourself to the hospital.

Why do you need your AAA checked?

It is important to have your aneurysm checked regularly because it can grow without causing symptoms.

The main concern is that it could grow large enough to rupture or burst. This risk is very low for small aneurysms (under 5.5cm). By monitoring its size, we can refer you to a vascular surgeon before the risk of rupture increases. For aneurysms smaller than 5.5cm, the risks of surgery are usually greater than the risk of the aneurysm itself.

Your aneurysm will be monitored (called surveillance) by vascular specialist nurses, vascular scientists or both.

Once your AAA measures 5.5cm, you will usually be referred to a vascular surgeon to discuss possible surgery. You will also be sent for a CT scan and an exercise bike test (CPEX). These tests are to check your general fitness for an operation. You don't usually need to see a surgeon before this unless you or your healthcare team have particular concerns.

Will you need treatment?

You won't need surgery if your aneurysm is small (less than 5.5cm).

If treatment is needed, this will be discussed with a vascular surgeon and a decision will be made together. Some people may not want to go through surgery or may not be well enough for it. More leaflets are available advising on possible surgical options.

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Your nurse or doctor may suggest that you start taking antiplatelet medication (to help prevent blood clots) and a statin (to lower cholesterol) if these are suitable for you.

Because an AAA is part of a disease affecting the blood vessels, (vascular system), these medications can help reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke.

How can you help yourself?

Stop smoking

Stopping smoking is the most important thing you can do. It helps slow the growth of your aneurysm and protects your arteries, reducing your risk of heart attack or stroke.

Quitting can be difficult, but your GP or pharmacist can support you, and the vascular nurse can signpost you to local smoking cessation services

Control high blood pressure

It is important that you keep good blood pressure control.

You may want to buy a home blood pressure monitor so you can check it yourself. You can also have it checked at your GP practice or a local pharmacy.

If you are prescribed medication for high blood pressure, take it exactly as instructed.

Salt can raise your blood pressure, so try to eat less than 6 grams of salt a day. Remember, many everyday foods already have salt added.

Get active

You don't need to limit your day-to-day activities.

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Exercises like walking or cycling are advised to help improve your overall fitness. Regular activity can help you lose weight, lower your blood pressure and support your mental wellbeing.

If you need surgery in the future, being active can also help you recover more quickly.

To be effective, the activity should make you feel warm and slightly out of breath. Everyday tasks like light gardening tasks or walking up and down stairs are also helpful.

Diet

Try to follow a healthy diet that includes fruit and vegetables, high-fibre foods and foods low in saturated fat.

If you are not sure what to eat, please ask your nurse or doctor for advice.

Manage your weight

If you are overweight, healthy eating can help you lose excess weight. While this will not directly affect your aneurysm, it can help lower your blood pressure and improve your overall health.

If you need surgery, losing weight can also reduce the risk of complications.

Try to keep alcohol within the recommended limit of 14 units per week, as alcohol is high in calories and can lead to weight gain.

Other important information

Driving with an AAA

For most up-to-date guidance, visit the DVLA or UK Government websites:

www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving

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- If you drive a car or motorbike and your aneurysm measures 6cm or more, you must tell the DVLA.
- You must stop driving if your AAA is 6.5cm or more.
- If you drive a bus, coach or lorry, you **must** inform the DVLA if you have an AAA of any size.
- You must not drive these vehicles if your AAA is 5.5cm or more.

It is also recommended that you tell your insurance provider about your condition.

Air travel and insurance

It is safe to fly with a small AAA. If you are planning a holiday abroad, you should let your travel insurance provider know about your condition. Your AAA is unlikely to cause problems while you are away, but if you need hospital treatment and have not declared it, this could affect your insurance cover.

If you are due to have surgery soon, your surgeon may suggest you don't fly.

Something to remember

Be careful with Fluroquinolone antibiotics, such as Ciprofloxacin, if you have an aneurysm. Your doctor will weigh the risks and benefits before prescribing these medicines.

The vascular nurse specialist will discuss this with you during your appointment and is available if you have any questions or concerns.

Contact numbers

- Vascular Nurses: 024 7696 8020
- Vascular Scientists: 024 7696 4000 ext. 7058

We hope you are satisfied with the care you have received from the Vascular services team. We welcome your comments, compliments and complaints, as they help us improve our service.

Patient Information

You can share your feedback by contacting the vascular nurses or PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service).

More Useful Contacts

- UHCW Patient advice and Liaison Service (PALS) : 0800 0284203
- Smoke Free Coventry and Warwickshire: <https://smokefreecw.co.uk>
- Fitter Futures: <https://fitterfutures.everyonehealth.co.uk/about-fitter-futures/>
- Healthy Lifestyles Coventry: <https://hlscoventry.org/>

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this Information in another language or format, please contact a Vascular Secretary on 024 7696 8020.

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Document History

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