

Why Is Leg Pain So Important

Leg pain that occurs during walking and relieved with rest is called Claudication. A common cause of claudication is poor blood flow to the arms or legs. When you are walking a lot, your legs require extra oxygen to feed your muscles. Oxygen is carried in the blood throughout your body and is required by your muscles to work. When muscles don't get enough oxygen they begin to hurt. The most common cause for this lack of circulation is when your arteries begin to clog. Atherosclerosis is when the arteries become hard and narrow from a buildup of cholesterol, fat, and other materials. This buildup of plaques can occur in any artery of the body but when it occurs in the arms or legs it is called peripheral arterial disease.

There are a lot of things that can cause pain in your arms and legs, but there are two distinctive symptoms associated with peripheral arterial disease. The first is that the pain occurs in the area that the damaged artery supplies while you are working it. The second is that it is intermittent which means it comes and goes with rest. So if left untreated you can see how this can affect the quality of your life. If you hurt with activity, you are more likely not to be as active. Many people ignore this pain as they chalk it up to getting a bit older.

There are other ways your doctor can tell if you are experiencing claudication besides the typical symptoms of pain with exercise and relief with rest. You have pulses in your arms and legs that can be checked to see if they are decreased or absent. You can compare the pressures in your arms and legs to see if they are diminished. This is called your ankle-brachial index and can be checked quickly in the doctor's office. More sophisticated tests can be done in the hospital including ultrasound, MRI, and angiography that can show where the damage is and the severity of the damage.

Treatment is designed to stop it from progressing and reducing the symptoms. The first thing to do is stop smoking and avoid second hand smoke. Smoking has been linked to promoting atherosclerosis. A regular exercise program is helpful as conditioned muscles work more efficiently requiring less oxygen. Know what your cholesterol level is and get it down since high cholesterol levels also has been linked to the promotion of atherosclerosis. More advanced treatments are available by your doctor if these don't relieve your symptoms. Medications can improve circulation by decreasing blood clotting, opening clogged arteries, and by lowering cholesterol. Angioplasty is a procedure where a balloon catheter can widen a clogged artery and a stent can be placed to keep the artery open. If the disease is more advanced, vascular surgery can be performed to open up the artery or bypass the clogged segment.

Claudication can be a potentially life altering symptom if left untreated. With a proper diagnosis and treatment plan the pain can be controlled. Don't simply chalk it up to getting older and not explore why you are having this pain. Claudication can be a sign of arterial blockage and if you have it one place, you can have it other places. That is why your doctor might start looking for blockages elsewhere if you are diagnosed with peripheral arterial disease.