

Managing Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA)

The aorta is the main blood vessel in your body.

It carries oxygen-rich blood from your heart to the rest of your body.

An abdominal aortic aneurysm or AAA is a weak spot in the aorta that bulges or balloons 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, causing life-threatening bleeding inside your body.

Certain things can cause an aneurysm. These things are called risk factors.

A common risk factor is atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. This happens when a fatty substance called plaque builds up and damages the wall of your aorta.

Some people are more likely to have AAA 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 (such as a parent, brother, or sister) has had an aortic aneurysm. Or you smoke or have ever smoked.

An abdominal aortic aneurysm tends to be found by chance during exams or tests done for other reasons.

If your doctor thinks you have an aortic aneurysm, you may have tests such as an ultrasound or a CT scan 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.

Now, if you've never smoked, your doctor may recommend screening based on other risk factors such as medical history or family history.

If you have an abdominal aortic aneurysm your goal is to manage it with healthy lifestyle changes, medical monitoring and treatment.

Treatment of an aneurysm depends on how big it is, how fast it's growing, and if you have symptoms.

Surgery or a less invasive procedure might be done, if there's a risk of it bursting open.

Small aortic aneurysms rarely rupture and are not usually treated.

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You will have routine ultrasound tests to check the size of the aneurysm and see how fast it is growing.

Even if your aortic aneurysm does not grow fast or rupture, you may be at risk for heart problems.

That's why managing AAA is important.

Your doctor may suggest that you exercise more, eat a heart-healthy diet, stop smoking, and maintain a healthy weight for you.

Your doctor may also prescribe medicines to help lower blood pressure and high cholesterol. 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 your chest, back, jaw, neck, belly, or side. A pulsating sensation in the belly. Coughing or hoarseness, or Throbbing or pulsing in your belly.

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:
You have a sudden, severe, sharp pain in your chest, back, jaw, neck, belly, or side.
You pass out.
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.
Or one or both feet change color, are painful, feel cool, or burn or tingle.

You know your body best, so be sure to let your doctor know if you have any problems. Knowing you have an abdominal aortic aneurysm can be stressful.

There are things you can do to help care for yourself.

Habits that are healthy for your heart include not smoking, eating heart-healthy foods, exercising regularly, and staying at a healthy weight that's right for you.

Remember, you can always talk to your doctor about other ways to care for yourself and what treatment may be best for you.