

Smoking and your vascular health

What is peripheral artery disease?

Peripheral artery disease is the build-up of fatty deposits in the walls of the arteries. This is called atherosclerosis. If the arteries become too narrow the oxygen-rich blood is not able to flow to the body's limbs. If the arteries become blocked this can cause a blood clot which can lead to gangrene or the amputation of the limb.

How does smoking affect my vascular health?

- Smokers have a significantly higher risk of developing peripheral artery disease than those who have never smoked.
- Narrowed arteries in other parts of the body can cause coronary artery disease - the reduction in blood supply to the heart muscle - which can cause chest pains or a heart attack. If the arteries to the neck are affected the flow of blood to the brain may also be affected, leading to stroke or death.

How would stopping smoking help my general and vascular health?

- Stopping smoking is one of the most effective ways patients with peripheral artery disease can reduce the need for limb amputation and the risk of premature death. It can also lead to improvements in leg symptoms.
- Evidence suggests that people who smoke and have a diagnosis of peripheral artery disease have poorer exercise capacity and an earlier onset of pain when walking compared to those who have the same diagnosis and do not smoke.
- Smoking also affects the long-term success rate of reconstructive arterial surgery. Studies have shown that by-pass surgery of the artery is three times as likely to fail if you continue to smoke as few as five cigarettes a day.

What happens after I stop smoking?

- After 20 minutes your heart rate and blood pressure return to normal.
- After eight-24 hours your lungs start to clear out mucus and other smoking debris.
- After 72 hours your breathing is easier and you have more energy. Your sense of smell and taste improve.
- After two-12 weeks your circulation improves and it becomes easier to walk and exercise.
- After three-nine months your lung function increases by up to 10%.
- After five years your risk of suffering a heart attack is cut by half.
- After 10 years your risk of getting lung cancer is half that of a smoker. Your risk of a heart attack is the same as someone who has never smoked.

Stopping smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your health. You are four times more likely to stop with the help of an NHS service (using stop smoking medication and support).

To be referred to your local stop smoking service or to speak to a specialist advisor please contact the Royal Free London stop smoking service on 020 7472 6393 or email rf.stopsmoking@nhs.net.

Alternatively you can call the National Stop Smoking Service on 0300 123 1044.