



Walking to improve vascular health and reduce symptoms of peripheral artery disease (PAD)

How does PAD affect walking ability?

When you walk, your leg muscles require more oxygen from the blood than when sitting or standing. The arteries of someone with PAD, narrowed by plaque build-up from cholesterol and other substances, prevent the delivery of this additional oxygen. The most common symptom of PAD is pain or discomfort in the legs, which can be cramping, aching, or fatigue while walking. The medical term for this is claudication. Most often, the pain is in the calves but it can also be in the thighs or buttocks. Claudication can be reduced by following a program of regular walking, which allows the leg muscles to use oxygen more efficiently and thereby reduces the symptoms. In spite of what you would think, even though it hurts somewhat, especially at first, if you walk regularly, following the guidelines discussed below, you will eventually be able to walk farther with less pain.

Why is walking important?

Regular walking to the point of developing moderate pain, then resting briefly, and repeating this process, will improve your ability to walk more than any other known exercise and most other medical and surgical treatments. If you have PAD, a structured walking program can make a big difference, enabling you to double or triple the distance you can walk before developing symptoms or before having to stop. Not only is walking one of the best exercises, it is also the simplest and least expensive. Walking can be done at any age and requires no special talent or equipment except good walking shoes. Walking is social too! You can walk with family or friends. In addition, walking is very self-rewarding because the benefits attained are based on something that you do for yourself to improve your health. Walking, and the other changes you may need to make like quitting smoking or following a healthy diet puts you back in control of your health. A walking program is key to successfully treating PAD.

What type of walking program is best for PAD?

There are two types of walking programs: a supervised program and a home-based program. Supervised walking programs are often found in a cardiac rehabilitation or clinical exercise center, medical fitness center, hospital, or vascular surgery practice, and are generally available at a modest fee, and in some cases, may be covered by insurance plans. Usually these programs last three to six months and include three or more walking sessions per week on a treadmill or track with supervision by exercise, nursing, and medical specialists. Research findings from these programs show improved walking ability in almost all patients. Supervised programs follow an exercise prescription that establishes the right pace and technique for you, based on your health condition. Plus you can be monitored in a safe setting, which is important if other health problems exist, such as diabetes or heart disease. The program will report your progress on a regular basis to you and your health care provider. A regular walking program not only improves walking ability but also is likely to produce benefits that reduce the risk for heart disease and stroke. Among these benefits are lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and weight loss (in conjunction with diet). The Vascular Disease Foundation (VDF) encourages participation in supervised walking programs for people with PAD to reduce symptoms of claudication and the risk for heart attack and stroke. However, many people with PAD do not have access to supervised programs. This informational guide will help you start your own walking program or continue on your own after starting with a supervised program. If you keep it up, you will soon be walking farther, with less pain. Now that's something to get excited about!

