Advice after a diagnosis of an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm

Information for patients
We will provide you with advice and support following the diagnosis of your Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm. This leaflet describes the role of the Vascular Nurse Specialist, followed by some lifestyle advice that you may find useful.

**What does the Vascular Nurse Specialist do?**

We can help in a variety of ways, such as discussing what an aortic aneurysm is, how it will affect you and how to stay fit and well with an aneurysm. We can also recommend the best medical treatment and provide information about surgical options.
How can the Vascular Nurse Specialist help me?

Many people find that knowing more about their aneurysm can ease their worries; you may want to know more about the following:

- diagnosis
- surveillance scans
- treatment
- symptoms.

What will happen when I meet with the Vascular Nurse Specialist?

**The Vascular Nurse Specialist will:**

- take your height, weight and blood pressure
- discuss medications that can help
- recommend the best medical treatment to you and your GP
- give you advice about keeping healthy
- give advice about giving up smoking, if necessary.

To speak to the Vascular Nurse Specialist in your local area, please contact the Thames Valley Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Screening Programme team.

Tel: **01865 572 636**
(9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)
Lifestyle information

If you have an aortic aneurysm, you will require close medical monitoring and possibly treatment.

Make sure you go to your regular check-ups, as this is where you will have the tests to check the size and growth of the aneurysm.

You may be able to make changes/monitor your symptoms at home, with support from your GP, to help prevent or control conditions that may lead to an increase in the size of your aortic aneurysm, such as atherosclerosis (a build-up of fatty deposits within the arteries) or high blood pressure.

**Giving up smoking**

Smoking is a major risk factor for aneurysms because it causes atherosclerosis and raises your blood pressure. There are also harmful substances in tobacco smoke that could damage the walls of your arteries.

Smokers are seven times more likely than non-smokers to develop an aortic aneurysm.

If you smoke, the most important change you can make is to stop smoking. People who smoke usually have faster-growing aneurysms than non-smokers.

**Controlling your blood pressure**

Take regular exercise, which can help reduce your blood pressure. Visit your doctor who will be able to tell you whether you only need to make lifestyle changes or if you might also need medication to help control your blood pressure.

Salt raises your blood pressure. The more salt you eat, the higher your blood pressure will be; aim to eat less than 6g (0.2oz) of salt a day – about a teaspoonful.

Eating a low-fat diet that includes lots of fibre (such as wholegrain rice, bread and pasta) and plenty of fruit and vegetables has been proven to help lower blood pressure. Fruit
and vegetables are full of vitamins, minerals and fibre to keep your body in good condition. Aim to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

**Controlling high cholesterol**

Eat a healthy diet, low in saturated fats and cholesterol, and take regular exercise. Make sure you visit your doctor to have your cholesterol levels checked; they may decide to start you on a cholesterol lowering tablet called a statin.

**Managing your weight**

Losing weight is not likely to change the course of an aortic aneurysm, but it may lower the risk of complications if you eventually need surgery.

Being overweight forces your heart to work harder to pump blood around your body, which can raise your blood pressure.

If you need to shed some weight, it is worth remembering that losing just a few pounds will make a big difference to your blood pressure and overall health. If you would like help to lose weight, please speak to your GP, who can refer you to a dietitian if needed.

**Exercise**

Being active and doing regular exercise lowers blood pressure, by keeping your heart and blood vessels in good condition. Regular exercise can also help you lose weight, which will also help lower your blood pressure.

Adults should do at least 150 minutes (two hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week, e.g. cycling or fast walking. To be worthwhile, the activity should make you feel warm and slightly out of breath. If you are overweight you may only have to walk up a slope to get this feeling.

Physical activity can include anything from sport to walking and gardening.
Diet
A heart-healthy diet includes fruits, vegetables, high-fibre foods, and foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

One of the leading causes of atherosclerosis is eating a diet that is high in fat.

High-fat foods can cause a build-up of fatty plaques in your arteries. This is because fatty foods contain cholesterol. There are two main types of cholesterol:

1. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) – this is mostly made up of fat, plus a small amount of protein. This type of cholesterol can block your arteries, so it is often referred to as ‘bad cholesterol’.

2. High-density lipoprotein (HDL) – this is mostly made up of protein, plus a small amount of fat. This type of cholesterol can reduce any blockage in your arteries, so it’s often referred to as ‘good cholesterol’.

There are also two types of fat: saturated and unsaturated. Avoid food containing saturated fats because these will increase the levels of bad cholesterol in your blood.

Foods high in saturated fat include:
• meat pies
• sausages and fatty cuts of meat
• butter
• ghee (a type of butter often used in Indian cooking)
• lard
• cream
• hard cheese
• cakes and biscuits
• foods containing coconut or palm oil.
Eating a small amount of unsaturated fat will increase the level of good cholesterol and reduce any blockages.

Foods high in unsaturated fat include:
- oily fish
- avocados
- nuts and seeds
- sunflower, rapeseed and olive oil.

**Alcohol**

Regularly drinking more alcohol than is recommended by the new guidelines from the UK Chief Medical Officer will raise your blood pressure over time. Drinking within the recommended limits is the best way to reduce your risk of developing high blood pressure.

Both men and women are advised not to drink over 14 units of alcohol per week, and to limit the amount taken in one go to no more than 3 to 4 units per day, with a break in between.

Alcohol is also high in calories, which can make you gain weight. In turn this can also increase your blood pressure.
How to contact us

If you have any queries or further questions about your aneurysm and how it might affect you and your lifestyle choices, please contact the Vascular Specialist Nurse:

Tel: 01865 572 636
(9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)

Useful information

**NHS Choices**
Website: www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx

**Here for Health – Health Improvement Advice Centre**
Oxford University Hospital drop-in centre for advice and support on healthy living, including physical activity, diet, smoking, alcohol and emotional wellbeing.

Tel: 01865 221 429
(Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)
Email: hereforhealth@ouh.nhs.uk
Website: www.ouh.nhs.uk/HereforHealth

**NHS Screening Programs**
Website: www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Screening/Pages/screening.aspx
Public health website with details for the AAA screening programs in the various countries of the UK.

**The Circulation Foundation**
Tel: 0207 869 6938
Email: info@circulationfoundation.org.uk
Website: www.circulationfoundation.org.uk
A charity which has a number of patient information leaflets to help explain vascular illness and its treatment. It also funds research into the prevention and causes of vascular disease.
**NHS Smokefree**  
Smokefree Helpline: 0300 123 1044  
Website: www.nhs.uk/smokefree  
Support and advice for giving up smoking.

**Change 4 life**  
Website: www.nhs.uk/change4life  
Advice for making changes towards a healthier life.
If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**