

### *Washington Hospital to Host Free Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Screening*

A patient arrives in the emergency room with a swollen, painful abdomen and suffering from shock. Frantic family members tell medical staff that the person was in good health, but soon a computed tomography (CT) scan shows the patient has suffered a ruptured abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA).

In most instances, the prognosis for a patient of this kind is not good. But it doesn't have to happen this way.

On Saturday, Oct. 24, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Washington Hospital will host a free community screening sponsored by Fremont Bank with a goal of finding abdominal aortic aneurysms before they rupture and become deadly.

Unlike some other serious health conditions, which may have significant warning signs, AAA often has none.

"An abdominal aortic aneurysm is a silent killer," says Dr. Ash Jain, cardiologist and medical director of Washington Hospital's Stroke Program - one of the two physicians interpreting results at the upcoming screening. "Most of the time the condition goes undiagnosed, and the first occurrence could be fatal. This is why it's important to screen before a rupture occurs."

Dr. John Thomas Mehigan, Chief of Vascular Surgery and medical director of Washington Hospital's Vascular Program, has partnered with Dr. Jain to perform the AAA screening at Washington Hospital for almost a decade and points out that most of these potentially fatal aneurysms are found by accident.

The hard-to-reach position of the artery that supplies blood to the abdomen, pelvis, and legs, makes an abdominal aortic aneurysm very difficult to feel by routine examination, Dr. Mehigan says.

"The best time to find an abdominal aortic aneurysm is before it ruptures rather than by accident, and that's why we go out and do this screening every year," he explains. "Over the course of screening about 150 people, we usually come up with 12, 13, even 14 people, most with small aneurysms, and we want to control their risk factors at this point."

"This screening program originally began after I operated on Morris Hyman, the founder of Fremont Bank, because his physician found an aneurysm on a back X-ray. Morris and I got to be friends, and he talked about how astonished he was that there was this terrible thing wrong with him and yet he had no idea. He said, 'We will pay for a community screening,' and every since Fremont Bank has partially funded expenses for the screening."

The question community members might have is: How do you know you are at risk for an aneurysm of this kind?

"The risk factors are high blood pressure, mainly, as well as atherosclerosis - or any risk factors for heart disease - including diabetes, high cholesterol, family history, smoking and obesity," according to Dr. Jain.

"High blood pressure is the major risk factor for AAA. Generally participants of the screening should be over 50 and have multiple risk factors."

The good news is that screening itself is easy.

"We perform an ultrasound of the stomach and look for the aneurysm," Dr. Jain explains. "It takes about five minutes to probe the area to find out if the artery in question has weakened or is bulging, which indicates an aneurysm. It's a painless test and if you find an aneurysm, anything less than five centimeters we can treat effectively with medications. In the case of an aneurysm of more than five centimeters in diameter, we will use stents to treat it aggressively."

If you or a loved one has several risk factors for AAA, there is every reason to pre-register for the screening, Dr. Mehigan says.

"I believe ours was the first program in the country to do these screenings, and today they are performed nationwide," Dr. Mehigan states. "Medicare now pays for a one-time screening if you're over the age of 65 because the yield of AAA diagnoses is so high when screened. We're pretty proud of the program, and often we find other health risks community members didn't know they had to begin with.

"The only thing you have to do for the screening is skip breakfast. There's no waiting and everyone sees a physician who will discuss the results for free. After the screening, you get a little snack and you're out of there."

Most importantly, Dr. Jain says the screening can help diagnose an aneurysm before it ruptures, easily preventing "a disaster" before it happens.

Five-minute screening saves lives

If you think you or a family member might have risk factors for an abdominal aortic aneurysm, call (800) 963-7070 to pre-register for the screening, which will take place on Saturday, Oct. 24, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Conrad E. Anderson, M.D. Auditorium located at 2500 Mowry Avenue in Fremont. Walk-ins are not accepted.