

Washington Hospital AAA Screening Could Save Your Life

If you have high blood pressure and are over age 60, you are at greater risk for developing an abdominal aortic aneurysm known as AAA. Often called the silent killer, an AAA can rupture, causing internal bleeding. The good news is a quick, painless, and free screening can detect the presence of this potentially deadly condition.

An abdominal aortic aneurysm is a weakened and bulging area in the lower part of the aorta, the major blood vessel that supplies blood to the body. The aorta goes from the heart to the center of the chest and abdomen. The aorta is the body's main supplier of blood, so a ruptured AAA can cause life-threatening internal bleeding.

"Often these types of aneurysms go undetected," said Dr. John Thomas Mehigan, a vascular surgeon and medical co-director of Washington Hospital's Vascular Services Program. "A majority of these aneurysms are found by accident or through AAA screening, mostly due to the hard-to-reach position of the artery that supplies blood to the abdomen. That makes the aneurysm very difficult to feel in a routine examination."

Dr. Mehigan will conduct AAA screenings with Dr. Ash Jain, a cardiologist and medical co-director of Washington Hospital's Vascular Services Program, on Saturday, January 26, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The screening will be held at the Conrad E. Anderson, MD Auditorium located at 2500 Mowry Avenue (Washington West) in Fremont. You must sign up for the screening in advance. No walk-ins will be accepted. To register for the screening, call (800) 963-7070.

The AAA screening is conducted with an ultrasound of the abdomen, which uses sound waves that create a picture of the internal organs, Dr. Jain explained. The noninvasive test uses a clear, water-based conducting gel that is applied to the skin over the abdomen. This helps with the transmission of the sound waves. A handheld probe called a transducer is then moved over the abdomen. The procedure takes about 15 minutes.

Don't Wait

If you are over age 60 and have any of the risk factors for developing an aortic aneurysm, you should consider getting the AAA screening, Dr. Mehigan said. While anyone can get this type of aneurysm, it is more common in men over the age of 60. Other risk factors include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes, smoking, obesity, and a positive family history.

"Don't wait until you have symptoms," Dr. Mehigan added. "By the time symptoms occur, it could be too late to prevent the aneurysm from rupturing. With early detection, we can catch the aneurysm when it is small and treat it with medication and by controlling the associated risk factors. Even if it

is not large enough to require surgery, we can prevent a potentially deadly rupture if we find the aneurysm in time."

Symptoms include a tingling or pulsating sensation near the bellybutton, pain in the abdomen or back, nausea, and dizziness. These symptoms often appear suddenly and without warning.

Abdominal aortic aneurysms usually start small, another reason they can go undetected for years, Dr. Mehigan said. Some of these aneurysms grow very slowly and never become a problem, while others can grow quickly and rupture before any symptoms occur.

Dr. Mehigan said aneurysms smaller than 4.5 centimeters can be treated effectively with medications. Those measuring three to four centimeters should be monitored with an ultrasound test every year, he added.

"The test is safe, painless, and noninvasive," Dr. Jain added. "The ultrasound technology detects and accurately measures the size of the aneurysm to determine if treatment is needed. After we perform the ultrasound testing to look for the presence of an aneurysm, patients have the opportunity to speak with a physician who will explain if they are at risk for an abdominal aortic aneurysm."

Call Today To Register

To register for this free upcoming screening, call (800) 963-7070. To find out about other programs and services at Washington Hospital that can help to keep you and your family healthy, visit www.whhs.com.