

Carotid Artery Disease

Information for patients and families

Read this information to learn:

- What carotid artery disease is
- The warning signs
- How it's treated
- How to reduce your risk



What are the carotid arteries?

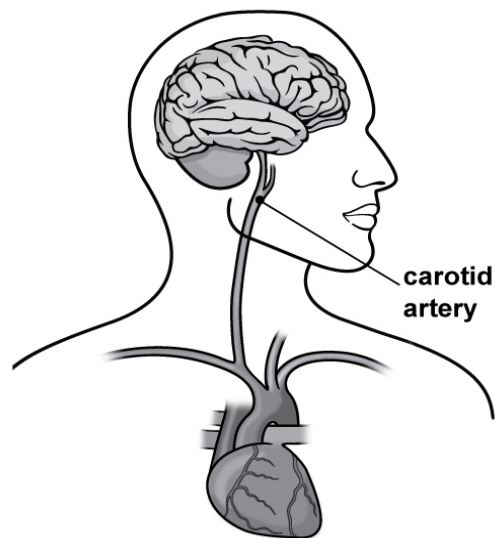
The carotid arteries are the major blood vessels that supply the blood to your brain and head. They run up either side of the neck towards the head.

Each of them divides into two branches:

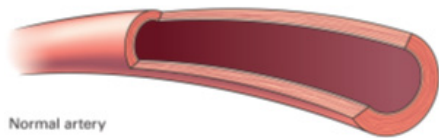
- the internal carotid artery, which brings blood to the brain and the eye; and
- the external carotid artery which supplies the neck, face and scalp.

What is carotid artery disease?

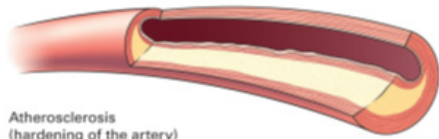
Carotid artery disease happens when these arteries become narrowed, reducing the blood flow to your brain. Severe narrowing (stenosis) of the carotid arteries puts you at risk for having a transient ischemic attack (TIA) or stroke.



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Normal artery



Atherosclerosis
(hardening of the artery)

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Why did the artery get narrow or blocked?

Over time, a fatty material called plaque has built up inside your arteries.

This process is called **atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries)**. Blood flow slows down because plaque is in the way.

Why did the plaque build up?

Plaque builds up slowly over time and there are risk factors that increase your chance of developing plaque.

Smoking

Cigarettes, pipes, cigars and chewing tobacco all cause plaque build up in your arteries. The chemicals damage the inner lining of your arteries and increase your risk for atherosclerosis. If you smoke, quitting is the best thing you can do for your health.

Diet

High cholesterol contributes to plaque which can clog arteries. Eating foods with less cholesterol and trans fats, and eating foods with more fibre can lower your risk. Your doctor may also recommend taking medications to lower your cholesterol.

High blood pressure

High blood pressure that is not controlled or treated is called **hypertension**. Hypertension puts stress on your heart, arteries and kidneys. Eating less salt, taking your medications, exercising, and relieving stress can keep your blood pressure in a healthy range.

Diabetes

If you have diabetes, you are at a higher risk for developing plaque in your arteries. High blood sugar levels can damage your heart, blood vessels, kidneys, eyes and nerves. It is important to follow the advice of your health care team about diet, treatment and medications.

What are the warning signs of carotid artery disease?

You may have no symptoms for a long time. Transient ischemic attacks (TIAs), also called mini-strokes,) can be symptoms of carotid artery disease. These attacks happen when blood flow to a part of the brain stops for a short period of time.

Symptoms may only last a few seconds or a few minutes. They are often a warning sign of a stroke so it's important not to ignore them.

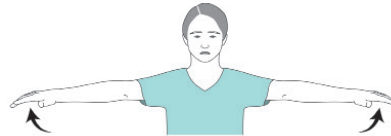


Go to the nearest emergency department if you have ANY OF these symptoms or warning signs of stroke:

F. Face: Is it drooping?



A. Arms: Can you raise both?



S. Speech: Is it slurred or jumbled?



T. Time: To call 9-1-1 right away



Go to the nearest emergency department if you have ANY OF these vision changes:

- You can't see out of one eye.
- Blackness over the top half of your eye, so you can only see out of the bottom half. It's like a curtain being pulled down.

What is the treatment for this disease?

Treating carotid artery disease is about controlling your risk factors by making lifestyle changes, taking medication and sometimes having surgery. Often people with carotid artery disease don't have any signs or symptoms until their arteries become so narrow that the reduced blood supply to the brain causes a TIA or stroke.

If you have these symptoms, you may need surgery.

What about surgery?

Surgery is intended to reduce your risk of stroke. The narrowing can often be treated by an operation to remove the plaque and any blood clots from inside the carotid artery (carotid endarterectomy). Ask your team for a separate brochure about this surgery.

How can I reduce my risk of getting the disease?

Making healthy changes is an important step in preventing or slowing down carotid artery disease. A healthy lifestyle can also help prevent or slow plaque buildup in other blood vessels in your body, such as those supplying your heart and your legs.

These include:

- Stopping smoking. If you smoke, quitting is the best thing you can do for your health.
- Exercising regularly. Set a goal to walk 30 minutes 3 times a week.
- Keeping your cholesterol low by eating foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol such as whole grains and fruits and vegetables.
- Maintaining a healthy weight.
- Lowering your high blood pressure with medication, lifestyle change and by reducing the stress in your life.
- Monitoring your blood sugar. If you have diabetes, see your doctor regularly to make sure your diabetes is well controlled.

While lifestyle changes can help, you may need to take medication recommended or prescribed by your health care team.

- You may need a cholesterol lowering drug (a statin like Crestor or Lipitor)
- You may need an anti-platelet medication (Aspirin or Plavix)

Who to call if you have questions

If you have questions or need to book an appointment, please call your surgeon's office:

Dr. T. Lindsay 416 340 4620

Dr. G. Oreopoulos 416 340 3275

Dr. G. Roche-Nagle 416 340 5332

Dr. B. Rubin 416 340 3645

Dr. T. Forbes 416 340 3274

Dr. M. Witheford 416 340 3868

or

Cindy Dickson, Vascular Clinic Nurse 416 340 3857



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