

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm

Information leaflet



What is an aneurysm?

An aneurysm is an area of localized widening (dilatation) of a blood vessel. The most common artery to be affected is the abdominal aorta, one of the large arteries through which blood passes from the heart to the rest of the body. The aorta bulges at the site of an aneurysm like a weak spot on an old worn tire.



Who is most likely to have an aneurysm?

Aortic aneurysms are most common after 60 years of age. Males are five times more likely to be affected than females. Men younger than 60 years with a brother or a father who has had an abdominal aortic aneurysm are at increased risk. Arterial diseases, smoking and high blood pressure are also risk factors.

What are the symptoms of an aneurysm?

Most abdominal aortic aneurysms produce no symptoms. (They are asymptomatic)

It may be felt by your doctor as a lump or a pulsation in your abdomen.

When they produce symptoms, the most common symptom is pain.

What is the natural history of aneurysm?

Abdominal aortic aneurysms can remain asymptomatic or produce mild to moderate symptoms for years. However, a rapidly expanding abdominal aneurysm can cause a sudden onset of severe abdominal or back pain.

A rapidly expanding aneurysm is at risk of rupture. The natural history of abdominal aortic aneurysms depends on their size and speed of expansion. Rupture of abdominal aortic aneurysms is uncommon when they are less than 55mm wide and expanding slowly.

Rupture is more common in aneurysms that are over 55mm wide and are expanding rapidly. Surgical repair is therefore recommended for aneurysms over 55mm wide.

What are the complications of aneurysm?

Rupture is the feared problem. This causes profuse bleeding and leads to shock. Death may rapidly follow.

A rupture is usually preceded by severe pain in the lower abdomen or back.

The rupture of an abdominal aortic aneurysm is a catastrophe.

How are abdominal aortic aneurysms repaired?

Not all aneurysms need an operation.

The risk of rupture and therefore the need for surgery depends on the size of the aneurysm. The goal of surgical treatment of an abdominal aortic aneurysm is to prevent its rupture. Traditionally, repair of an abdominal aortic aneurysm has been open surgery with removal of the aneurysm.

An alternative technique using keyhole surgery and inserting a stent graft is commonly used today.

A vascular surgeon will decide the best course of treatment for individual patients.

What tests help in the diagnosis of an abdominal aortic aneurysm?

An ultrasound examination of the abdomen is a very good way of finding an aneurysm. Ultrasound has about 98% accuracy in measuring the size of an aneurysm, and is safe and non-invasive. It is a painless procedure where an ultrasound probe is pressed gently against the abdomen to give a clear picture of the size of the aneurysm.

When an aneurysm is incidentally discovered with CT, MRI or x-rays, ultrasound is a useful tool to monitor its size.

If your aneurysm is smaller than the size at which an operation is needed you will be entered into a surveillance programme which entails serial ultrasound scans at intervals to monitor growth of your abdominal aortic aneurysm.



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What is the preparation for an ultrasound?

Preparation for ultrasound is minimal.

You will be requested to avoid eating and drinking, with the exception of water, for 8 hours prior to your examination. This reduces bowel gas which can obscure important structures in the abdomen. It is important to get a clear image of the aorta during the ultrasound examination so that it can be measured accurately.

Abdominal aortic aneurysm - the facts

- An aneurysm is an abnormal area of localized widening of a blood vessel.
- The aorta bulges at the site of an aneurysm like a weak spot on a worn tire.
- 5% of men over 60 years develop an abdominal aortic aneurysm.

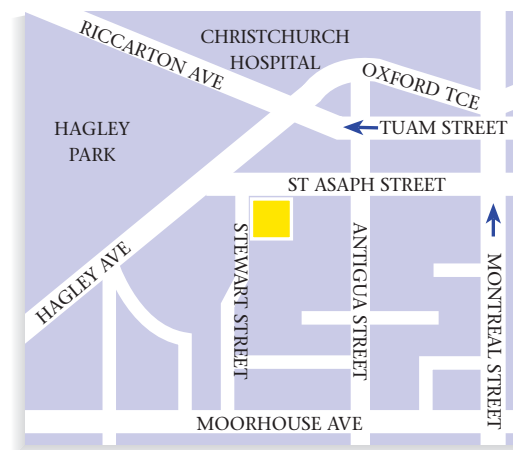
- Men with a family history, smokers or those with atherosclerosis or high blood pressure are at increased risk of abdominal aortic aneurysm.
- Abdominal aortic aneurysms often do not cause symptoms.
- An abdominal aortic aneurysm can cause abdominal or back pain or a prominent abdominal pulsation.
- Rupture of an aortic aneurysm can be fatal.
- Ultrasound is a safe, non-invasive examination to diagnose and monitor abdominal aortic aneurysms.
- If an aneurysm is suspected or found incidentally, your GP can refer you to a vascular surgeon for advice.
- For more information go to www.crg.co.nz or www.cvg.co.nz

Where to go for your Ultrasound scan



Hagley Radiology

16 St. Asaph Street, Christchurch
Hours: 8am - 5pm weekdays
Telephone 0800 TOXRAY (0800 869 729)
or (03) 366 0095
Fax (03) 379 9549
Email AAAregister@crg.co.nz



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