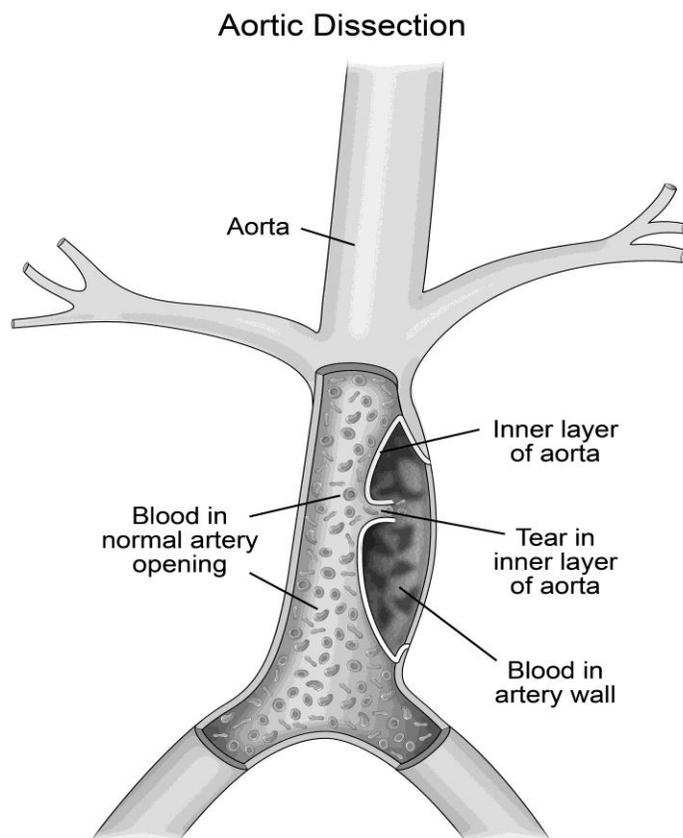


What You Need to Know about Going Home with an Aortic Dissection

The Aorta

There are two types of blood vessels in the body – arteries and veins. Arteries carry blood rich in oxygen from the heart to all the organs of the body. Veins carry blood back to the heart. The aorta is the largest artery in the body. It is also the most important blood vessel. If there is a problem with your aorta or arteries, the blood flow to the rest of your body is decreased.



An aortic dissection is an illness where a small hole forms and grows in the inner wall of the aorta. The hole then causes bleeding into and along the wall of the aorta. The layers of the aorta split and make two paths in the artery. In one path, blood keeps going to the rest of the body and in the other, the blood stays still. The still blood can pool blocking blood flow to the rest of the body. This causes the aorta walls to weaken and split more, making the dissection worse.

Treatments

If a dissection is small, taking medications may help. Pills you will take will lower your blood pressure and heart rate. This will prevent or slow the dissection from growing. The pressure put on your blood vessels and heart will be lower.

Your doctor will watch your dissection closely. You will have Computerized Tomography (CT) scans or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans often to see pictures of it.

Surgery is also an option. During the surgery, the damaged areas of the aorta are removed. A graft will replace any damaged areas.

Blood Pressure

You will be sent home with your own blood pressure cuff. It is important to keep your blood pressure under control. This means the top number (systolic blood pressure) is less than 120.

- Sitting in a chair next to a table, rest your arm at the same level as your heart. Sit up straight with your back against the chair. Make sure your legs are uncrossed. Rest your forearm on the table with the palm of your hand facing up.
- The nurse will teach you how to use your blood pressure cuff before you leave the hospital.
- Follow your doctor's instructions on when and how often to measure your blood pressure.
- You should write down the date, time, and both top and bottom pressure numbers.
- Bring the log with you to your doctor's visits.

Medications

- Take all medications prescribed to you. Medications for blood pressure are the most important.
- Pain can raise your blood pressure. You may also be prescribed pain medication. Morphine is a common pain medication.

Smoking

- Try to quit smoking.
- Smoking can decrease blood flow, shrink your arteries, and raise your blood pressure.
- If you would like help quitting, call the Quit Line: 1-800-QUITNOW (784-8669).

Diet

- You should eat a heart healthy diet. This includes the following guidelines.
- Eating less saturated fat. Eat less fatty meats, fried foods, butter, and whole milk dairy products. Eat more fish, chicken, turkey, and veal. Eat less beef, lamb, and pork.
- Limit eating organ meats (liver, kidneys, etc.) to once a month.
- Use polyunsaturated oils, such as canola, safflower, soybean, sunflower, sesame, and cottonseed oils.
- Drink skim milk instead of whole milk.
- Eat sherbet or Italian ice instead of ice cream.
- Eat less trans fats. Eat fewer sweets such as donuts, cookies, and desserts.
- Eat fewer carbohydrates. Eat less sugars and sweetened drinks.
- Eat less sodium. Eat less processed food. Do not add extra salt to your food.
- Eat less cholesterol. Eat fewer egg yolks and shrimp.

Exercise

- Avoid strenuous physical activity
- Avoid activities that involve heavy lifting
- Light to mild aerobic exercise such as walking is still recommended
- Normal daily activities such as cooking, driving, and climbing stairs are not restricted

Are You at Risk for Peripheral Vascular Disease?

You are more likely to have poor blood flow to your legs and feet if you:

- Smoke
- Have diabetes
 - People who smoke or have diabetes have the greatest risk of developing peripheral vascular disease due to reduced blood flow.
- Have high blood pressure (140/90 mmHg or higher)
- Have high cholesterol (total blood cholesterol over 240 mg/dL)
- Are over age 50
- Do not exercise
- Are obese (a body mass index over 30)
- Have a history of heart disease, peripheral vascular disease or stroke in your family

When should you call your clinic?

- A tender abdomen
- Back pain
- Worsening blood pressure. The top number greater than 120.

When should you call 911?

- Any symptoms of a worsening dissection:
 - Severe, sudden or sharp pain in your chest, back or stomach
 - Sudden feeling of ‘ripping’ or ‘tearing’ pain
 - Trouble breathing
 - Trouble swallowing
 - Dizziness, fainting, or confusion
 - Hoarseness or wheezing
 - Anxiety or feeling of impending doom

Phone Numbers

Vascular Surgery Clinic is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm at **(608) 263-8915**.

After hours, and on weekends and holidays, your call will be answered by a paging operator. Ask for the **Vascular Surgery doctor on call**. Give your name and phone number with area code. The doctor will call you back.

If you live out of the area, call **1-800-323-8942**.

References:

- Juang, D., Braverman, A.C., & Eagle, K. (2008). Aortic Dissection. *Circulation*, 118 (1). 507-510.
- Fahey, Victoria A. 4th Ed. *Vascular Nursing*. Philadelphia: WB Saunders Co., 2004.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 1/2015 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7728