'Heart Disease' Can Also Affect Your Feet, Kidneys and Brain

ONE IN FIVE AMERICANS OVER AGE 60 HAVE PERIPHERAL ARTERY DISEASE
CHICAGO, Illinois, Feb. 9, 2017 – In February, American Heart Month raises awareness about heart disease. But “heart disease” is a catch-all term that refers to numerous problems, many of which are related to hardening of the
arteries.

Hardening of the arteries doesn't just happen in the heart, noted Dr. Ali AbuRahma, secretary of the Society for Vascular Surgery, it happens all over the body. The progressive disease, also known as arteriosclerosis, causes plaque to start clogging up the arteries, making it more difficult for oxygen-rich blood to flow throughout the body. That is bad for the heart, but also dangerous for the legs, feet, kidneys and the brain.

Arteriosclerosis usually doesn't affect every blood vessel uniformly, Dr. AbuRahma said. In most people with arteriosclerosis, there will be a general hardening of the arteries throughout the body, but some arteries will have more plaque than others.

When this disease gets worse in the legs and feet, it is called peripheral arterial disease, also known as PAD. Unfortunately, PAD is very common in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 8.5 million Americans have PAD, including up to 20 percent of those older than 60. When not enough oxygen-rich blood is pumping through the legs and feet, the feet may develop wounds that won't heal. In advanced cases, patients may face amputation.

Hardening of the arteries may have no symptoms at all until the disease has become advanced. However, some people may have leg pain when they walk, a symptom of PAD. These patients should inform their physician, who may order a painless, non-invasive test called an ankle-brachial Doppler test that measures the blood pressure in the ankles.

The good news is that hardening of the arteries is manageable.

“We recommend that everyone take a few sensible health measures to keep their veins and arteries healthy,” said Dr. AbuRahma. “First, know your ‘numbers,’ that is, manage your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol. Don’t smoke and get regular physical activity. Try to lower your stress level, too.”

For those whose disease has advanced, there is still hope, he added.

“Vascular specialists are trained to restore blood flow,” he said, “but most of our long-term patients never need anything other than medication and good health habits. But if non-invasive treatments no longer work, we can install minimally invasive balloons or stents to unblock blood vessels, or perform open procedures, in which we create bypasses around a blocked artery.”

Those who have vascular disease should be under the care of a vascular specialist for the rest of their lives, he added. “But if you want to live to be a healthy old age, the best thing you can do is to really follow your doctor’s orders. Don’t tune it out when your doctor repeats advice you may have heard before. Knowing your numbers, exercising and not smoking can make a world of difference.”

Learn more about the vascular system and arteriosclerosis. ##

The Society for Vascular Surgery® (SVS) is a 5,600-member, not-for-profit professional medical society, composed primarily of specialty-trained vascular surgeons, which seeks to advance excellence and innovation in vascular health through education, advocacy, research and public awareness.

CAPTION: For those who are healthy enough for exercise, regular activity is beneficial for the circulatory system in the legs, feet, heart and brain.