ROSEMONT, Ill., Sept. 24, 2020 – It is natural to experience growing aches and pains with age – a tightness in your lower back after standing for long periods of time, a crick in the knee as you stand up or stiff ankles in the cold. But if
you have persistent pain in the legs for no obvious reason, it is important to take it more seriously and notify your physician.

As September is, PAD – peripheral artery disease – Awareness Month, the Society for Vascular Surgery (SVS) wants people to understand the most common symptoms and risk factors for the disease. PAD is also commonly called atherosclerosis, hardening of the arteries and poor circulation in the limbs. But whatever you call it, PAD affects 10 million people in the U.S. and more than 200 million people worldwide, most of them over age 50. PAD occurs when plaque in the arteries blocks the flow of oxygen-rich blood to the extremities, particularly the legs and feet.

SVS is the leading organization for helping to improve vascular health and has developed multiple resources on PAD to help people stay informed of the disease. Below are the answers to some of the top questions about PAD.

Is leg pain always associated with PAD?

Because plaque builds up so slowly, someone with PAD may not show any symptoms at first. Indeed, since plaque buildup can occur with normal aging, the presence of plaque alone is usually not a reason for surgery. In addition, leg pain does not always indicate PAD. Common symptoms include feeling leg pain when walking or climbing. Legs may also feel heavier or numb, primarily in the calves and pain can also travel to thighs and feet. Changes to the legs in general including amount of hair on the legs, temperature, shinier skin and color changes also could be symptoms of PAD.

Does PAD lead to other problems?

If plaque is in the legs, it likely means it exists elsewhere in the body too, including the heart. Plaque buildup in the arteries leading to the heart or brain can lead to heart attack or stroke. People with diabetes who have PAD have a greater chance of getting chronic limb-threatening ischemia and getting an infection in the feet or legs. A vascular surgeon can help determine the extent to which plaque has developed.

When should you see a doctor for PAD?

Certain risk factors, including smoking, having a family history of PAD, heart attack, or stroke, high blood pressure or high cholesterol can indicate PAD. Age, weight and diabetes also play key roles. If you are older than 50, have diabetes, are a smoker or overweight and have leg pain when you walk it is a good sign to talk to your doctor. Older patients, especially those who are at risk, can seek noninvasive procedures including ultrasound and leg blood pressure examination to determine if they have PAD and its severity.

Are there treatments for PAD?

The goal in treating PAD is to manage the symptoms, such as leg pain and stop the progression of atherosclerosis throughout the body to reduce your risk of more serious complications.

Lifestyle changes including supervised exercise and quitting smoking can reduce these risk of complications. In some cases, your physician may recommend surgery.

When should you seek a referral from your primary care physician?

If you experience PAD symptoms, ask your primary care physician to refer you to a vascular surgeon. Vascular surgeons can perform any necessary treatments, including medication management or a minimally invasive procedure. People who have been diagnosed with PAD are usually under the care of a vascular surgeon.

Vascular surgeons do not just perform surgeries. They are highly trained experts who manage the long-term care of patients with all stages of circulatory disorders, providing diagnosis, medical management, non-surgical solutions, checkups and surgery. Vascular surgeons work in partnership with a patient’s treatment team, including primary care physicians, to help manage his/her long-term health management from diagnosis to management to surgery.
Where can I get more information on PAD?

The Society for Vascular Surgery PAD Flyer provides helpful information on PAD to become informed and help determine when you may need to contact a vascular specialist. Additional resources on PAD and other vascular conditions can be found at: https://vascular.org/patient-resources/vascular-conditions/peripheral-arterial-disease.

About The Society for Vascular Surgery

The Society for Vascular Surgery is the leading not-for-profit, professional medical society on establishing causes and treatments for vascular disease. SVS seeks to advance excellence and innovation in vascular health through education, advocacy, research and public awareness and is composed of specialty-trained vascular surgeons who are dedicated to providing comprehensive care for vascular disease. For more information visit www.vascular.org. Follow the SVS on Facebook @VascularHealth, Twitter @VascularSVS and Instagram @societyforvascularsurgery.

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