Why do you need to see a vascular surgeon?
CHICAGO, Illinois, Dec. 17, 2018 – Alice is a smoker who was getting severe cramps in her legs when she walked. She thought she had just pulled a muscle, but after an office test, her primary care physician referred her to a vascular surgeon.

That made her wonder – What is a vascular surgeon? Why do I need surgery?

She is not the first person to ask those questions. In fact, the web page, “What is a Vascular Surgeon?” has been the number one most-visited page at the Society for Vascular Surgery’s site, Vascular.org, in 2018.

“I get a lot of calls from patients who have been referred to our office, asking why they need to see a vascular surgeon,” said Nancy Crowell, a vascular nurse clinician in St. Paul, Minn. “I explain why they are coming in. It’s human nature to want to know what to expect, and it helps to know what a vascular surgeon would do to treat their condition.”

Vascular surgeons are experts in treating diseases of the circulatory system. Blood vessels -- arteries carrying oxygen-rich blood and veins carrying blood back to the heart -- are the expressways, streets and alleys of the circulatory system. Without oxygen, no part of the body can function. Conditions such as blood clots or hardening of the arteries can create “traffic jams” in blood vessels, obstructing the flow of blood to or from any part of the body. Vascular disease can occur at any age but is more common among older patients.


Most people have no need to know what a vascular surgeon does until later in life, but as our population ages, more patients will be referred to a vascular surgeon. Here are some frequently asked questions:

• Why would I need a vascular surgeon? Often, patients unexpectedly need a vascular surgeon when they learn they have a vascular condition that could cause severe problems. If you are referred to a vascular surgeon, it’s likely your condition needs further diagnosis and a treatment plan. A primary care physician probably will give you the name of a vascular surgeon, but U.S. patients who want to explore their options can also visit: www.vascular.org/find-specialist.

• Is the surgeon going to operate on me? Vascular surgeons make sure their patients know and understand all their options. Most patients don’t require surgery and those who are able to make lifestyle changes may be able to avoid it indefinitely. Innovations in surgery have made open surgeries less common so when surgery is indicated, it is likely that the patient will be treated with an endovascular procedure, which requires only a tiny incision.

• Do other types of specialists do the same thing? Not necessarily. A board-certified vascular surgeon offers a full spectrum of care as a comprehensive vascular care expert, covering every possible treatment for circulation disorders, from prescription medications, to physical therapy, to endovascular procedures, to open surgeries. Other specialists may be trained in just one or two specific aspects of vascular treatment.

For Alice, that trip to the vascular surgeon’s office was life-changing. She learned she had early stage peripheral arterial disease, meaning the arteries in her legs were too narrowed by plaque to deliver enough oxygen to her legs. The surgeon prescribed statins, started Alice on a supervised exercise therapy plan and urged her to quit smoking. Her leg pain is almost completely gone and so far, she has avoided surgery.

Alice was lucky that her condition was caught early.

“As is the case in most diseases,” said Dr. Gregory Pearl, a member of the Society for Vascular Surgery, “the earlier the intervention, the simpler and more successful the treatment.”

Learn more about vascular diseases, vascular health and how vascular surgeons can help, here: https://vascular.org/patient-resources.