Intermountain® Healthcare

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Surgery

Recovering at home

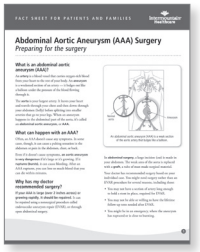
What is an abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA)?

An **aneurysm** is a weakened section of an artery or vein that balloons out. The **aorta** is your largest artery. It travels from your heart through your abdomen (belly), and then splits into smaller arteries that go to your legs.

When the aneurysm is in the abdominal part of the aorta, it's called an **abdominal aortic aneurysm**, or **AAA**. An abdominal aortic aneurysm is dangerous, because it can burst and cause bleeding.

Your surgery and recovery

Your surgery repaired the weakened section to prevent it from bursting. See the Intermountain fact sheet *Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA): Preparing for Surgery* for more information about what happened in the surgery.


FACT SHEET FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Surgery

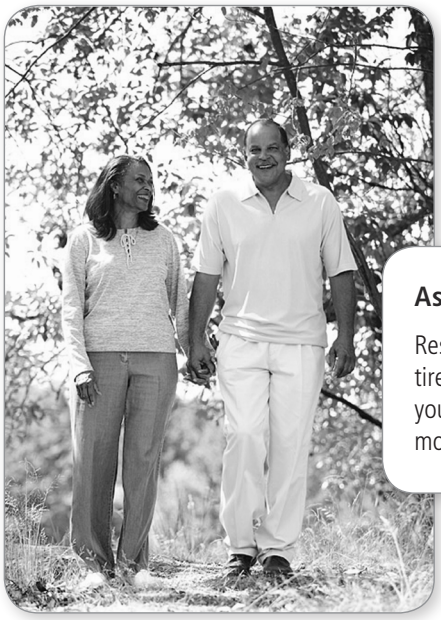
Preparing for the surgery

Recovery after AAA surgery can take 6 to 8 weeks. This fact sheet explains how to take care of yourself and speed your recovery at home.

Activity

While you are recovering, rest whenever you begin to feel tired. Resume activities slowly, doing a bit more each day.

- **Do NOT drive until your doctor approves it,** usually 2 weeks after surgery. Before you begin driving again, be sure you are physically strong enough, your judgment is clear, and you know how your pain medication affects you.



As you recover

Rest when you feel tired, but increase your activity a little more each day.

- **Gradually increase your physical activity.** Walking is a good way to exercise. Start out slowly. As you can, add a little more walking time.
- **Do not put too much stress on your abdomen until it has healed.** Follow these instructions:
  - For the first four weeks, do NOT do household chores such as vacuuming, lawn mowing, or laundry. After the fourth week, gradually increase these activities over the following two weeks.
  - For the first six weeks, do NOT lift more than 5 to 10 pounds or anything you have to strain to pick up.
- **To find out when you can return to work,** speak with your doctor.
- **You may have sex when you feel ready.** Stop if you experience pain or discomfort.

Wound care

Your incision will take several weeks to heal. You don't need to cover the incision while you are home, but please follow these directions while it heals:

- **Important — check the incision every day.** Please call your surgeon to report any signs of infection. These include redness, drainage, or increased tenderness.
- **To prevent infection, clean the incision every day.** You may shower 48 hours after surgery, but do not let the water directly hit the incision. Use soap and water to wash the site and pat it dry with a clean towel.
- **Do NOT take baths.** Soaking exposes your incision to more bacteria.
- **Do NOT use lotion, powder, cream, ointment, or any other product** on the incision, unless your doctor tells you to.
- **Do NOT touch or handle** the incision any more than necessary.
- **Follow your doctor's instructions about staples or steri-strips** used to close the incision:
  - If you have staples, you'll need to return to your doctor's office in about 7 to 10 days so they can be removed.
  - If you have steri-strips, gently remove them before your follow-up appointment.

Constipation

Constipation is common after surgery. Try these tips to prevent or manage it:

- Include fruit, fiber, and bran in your diet.
- Drink plenty of liquids.
- Consider using a stool softener for as long as you're taking your pain medication. Pain medication can cause constipation.
- If you do become constipated, use a mild laxative. You can also try a small enema.

If these measures do not work, call your primary care doctor.

Diet

A balanced diet will help you feel better and heal faster. During your recovery and after, aim to eat a well-balanced diet that focuses on:

- Protein to help tissues heal
- Fresh fruit and vegetables for vitamins and other important nutrients
- Fluids and fiber to help your bowels move

If your healthcare providers have given you a special diet to use, be sure to follow their directions. *See page 4 for information on a diet that can help prevent future blood vessel problems.*

When should I get medical help?

Call your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- Fever of 102° F or higher
- Redness, unusual drainage, warmth, or increasing pain at the incision site
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Not being able to have a bowel movement
- Burning or pain when you urinate

Call 911 if you have any of these symptoms:

- A sudden temperature change (coldness) in your legs
- Significant pain in your legs
- A sudden change in the color of your legs, such as turning white or blue
- Swelling at the surgical site
- Separation of the incision (sides of the wound pulling apart)
- Sudden difficulty in breathing

Taking charge of peripheral vascular disease (PVD)

Your aneurysm is a sign of peripheral vascular disease. **Peripheral vascular disease (PVD)** is caused by the buildup of a material called **plaque** in your blood vessels. With PVD, the blood vessels can become narrowed or clogged, so blood doesn't flow as freely. Fortunately, you can slow this disease process — and sometimes even stop it — by making changes in your lifestyle.

What factors increase the risk of PVD?

Risk factors for PVD include:

- **Sex, age, and family history.** Men are at higher risk, but women after menopause have an increased risk, too.
- **Diabetes and high blood pressure.** These factors can be controlled to reduce your risk.
- **Smoking, high cholesterol, obesity, stress, and lack of exercise.** You can change these factors — or eliminate them completely.

How can I reduce my risk?

To help reduce your risk and avoid future problems, follow these guidelines:

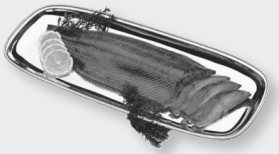
- **If you smoke, quit.** This is the single biggest difference you can make in your health. Intermountain's booklet *Quitting Tobacco: Your Journey to Freedom* has information and encouragement. And help is available. Call 1-888-567-TRUTH for the Utah Tobacco Quit Line, or go to **www.utah.quitnet.com**.

- **If you have diabetes, control it** by keeping your blood glucose (blood sugar) between 70 to 130 before a meal, and by keeping your **HbA1c** below 7% (HbA1c is a blood test that measures your long-term blood sugar level). Talk to your healthcare provider to learn more about managing your diabetes and ask about diabetes education classes or referrals.
- **Control your blood pressure.** Keeping your blood pressure less than 120/80 can help protect your blood vessels from further damage. Medication, exercise, and weight loss can help you meet this goal.
- **Control your cholesterol.** Your total cholesterol should be under 200 and your LDL ("bad") cholesterol should be under 100. This can be done with medications and a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet. If you have diabetes, it is important to take cholesterol medication, even if your cholesterol is normal.
- **If you're carrying extra weight, lose it — slowly and safely.** Talk to your healthcare provider if you would like to meet with a dietitian. Your healthcare provider can also tell you about Weigh to Health classes offered by Intermountain.
- **Eat a "heart smart" diet.** This means a diet that is low in saturated fats, cholesterol, and salt — and high in fresh fruits, fiber, and vegetables. The American Heart Association provides a full set of guidelines (see **www.americanheart.org/nutrition**). Also, see page 4 for some heart-healthy eating tips to get you started.
- **Step up your physical activity.** Physical activity will help you lose weight, lower your cholesterol levels, lower your blood pressure, and strengthen your heart.
- **Follow your doctor's instructions for taking medications.** Certain medications are especially helpful for PVD. They include aspirin and other antiplatelet (anti-clot) medications, cholesterol-lowering medication, and blood pressure medication.
- **Check with your doctor before taking supplements.** While it is usually a good idea to take a multivitamin, supplements can interact with other medications and cause side effects. Talk to your doctor first before you start taking any vitamin or herbal supplement.
- **Follow up.** Continue to see your doctor for regular checkups and follow-up testing.

Heart-healthy eating

How can you lower your cholesterol, manage blood sugar, control blood pressure, and have a healthier future? Follow these six building blocks:

1. **Eat lots of fruit and vegetables.** Along with crunch and flavor, they give you healthy fiber and nutrients.
2. **Eat more whole grains.** Whole wheat bread, oatmeal, and brown rice are just a few examples of whole-grain foods that give you fiber and complex carbohydrates.
3. **Choose unsaturated fats and oils.** Unsaturated fat is liquid at room temperature, and comes mostly from plant sources. Examples include olive and canola oils, nuts, olives, avocados, and salmon.



4. **Choose healthy proteins.** Some sources of protein can protect your heart and blood vessels over time. These include fish, beans, soy, and nuts.
5. **Choose low-fat dairy products.** Stick with milk that's 1% or less fat, and enjoy low-fat or fat-free yogurt and cottage cheese.
6. **Limit sodium (salt) and sugar.** Cutting back on salt is an important way to lower your blood pressure and protect your arteries. And for optimal weight and long-lasting energy, keep sugar and sweets to a minimum.

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