



Ask the Doctor.

Understanding Carotid Artery Disease.

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What is carotid artery disease?

Your carotid arteries are located in the neck on either side of the windpipe.

Carotid artery disease is usually caused by a hardening or narrowing of these arteries. Over time, fat deposits and cholesterol can cause plaque to build up on the walls of your arteries, eventually narrowing them and blocking the flow of blood to your brain. When arteries become clogged or blocked, a stroke may occur.

How do I know if I have it?

Blockage in the carotid arteries can cause symptoms of stroke (muscle weakness, dizziness, or trouble talking, walking or seeing). Your doctor may hear a rumbling sound in the neck that can be heard with a stethoscope. However, the best way to detect a blockage and measure its severity is with an ultrasound examination called a carotid duplex scan.

Who is at risk for carotid artery disease?

The risk of carotid artery disease increases with age, high cholesterol, hypertension and, importantly, cigarette smoking. Patients with peripheral vascular disease have a much greater risk of carotid artery disease.

How is it treated?

Carotid artery disease can be medically treated with platelet inhibitors, such as aspirin or Plavix®. In addition, medica-

tions that lower cholesterol and lifestyle changes, such as controlling your blood pressure and diabetes, also are very important in reducing the risk of stroke with carotid artery disease.

Surgical therapy is necessary when carotid atherosclerosis is very severe or has caused a stroke or transient ischemic attack (TIAs). The most common surgical procedure for carotid artery disease is an incision in the neck to remove the blood vessel blockage and restore flow.

Recently, carotid artery angioplasty or stenting has been used to open clogged carotid arteries. The doctor inserts a long thin tube in your groin artery, and under X-ray guidance, accesses the blockage and opens the artery, improving blood flow to the brain.

The treatment decision is usually best made by your physician.

Brent T. Allen, MD, is a board-certified general and vascular surgeon, on staff at Missouri Baptist Medical Center. He received his medical degree, completed his internship and did his residency in general surgery at Washington University School of Medicine, where he also completed a surgical research fellowship. He also completed a residency in vascular surgery at Baylor College of Medicine.

