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What Is an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm?

An abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) is a balloon-like bulge in your aorta, which is the main artery in your body that moves blood throughout your body. Some may enlarge very slowly and never require intervention. But sometimes they suddenly rupture, which is life-threatening.

What Causes an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm?

These aneurysms can happen when the wall of the aorta is weakened, which can be caused by:

- Damage or injury, such as from a car accident
- Genetic influences
- Lifestyle behaviors, such as smoking, weight lifting or use of stimulants like cocaine
- Medical conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), high blood pressure and chronic kidney disease

What Are the Signs of an Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm?

You may not know you have a AAA until it ruptures. Symptoms vary depending on exactly where it is located. Some signs include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Feeling full even if you haven't had much to eat
- Lightheadedness
- Rapid heart rate
- Sudden, severe pain in your abdomen, chest or back

How Are Abdominal Aortic Aneurysms Treated?

Your vascular surgeon or specialist will work with you to make a diagnosis and determine which treatment is best for you. Treatment for AAA depends on where it is located, its cause, its size and what your risk factors are. Slow-growing, smaller aneurysms may be monitored with periodic ultrasounds, for example, while other treatment possibilities include medications, lifestyle changes and surgery.

What Do Vascular Surgeons Do?

If you think vascular surgeons only fix varicose veins, you'll be surprised to learn the wide range of conditions they specialize in treating, including:

- Carotid artery disease
- Chronic wounds
- Deep vein thrombosis
- Peripheral artery disease

"Vascular surgeons take care of blood vessels everywhere in the body, excluding the heart," says vascular surgeon [Frank Sharp, M.D.](#)

Vascular surgery is a highly specialized practice that requires additional training beyond the years of the typical medical and surgery schooling, Dr. Sharp says. Nationally, there aren't many around, which makes [Jersey Coast Vascular Institute](#) at [Ocean Medical Center](#)—with its seven board-certified, fellowship-trained vascular specialists—a unique place. Ocean has vascular surgeons staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to handle follow-up care as well as emergency situations like a ruptured AAA.

Next Steps & Resources:

- *Learn how the [Jersey Shore Vascular Institute](#) is improving local care for patients with vascular diseases.*
- *Dr. Sharp practices in Brick. To make an appointment, call [732-202-1500](tel:732-202-1500).*

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