

# Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) screening



**Things you need  
to know**



A quick, free and painless scan for men aged 65 and over

## Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for all men aged 65 and over who live in Northern Ireland. It provides information on abdominal aortic aneurysm screening (also called AAA screening). The AAA screening check is a quick, simple, painless ultrasound scan provided free of charge.

## What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet tells you:

- what an AAA is
- what happens when you go for AAA screening
- what the possible results are
- what happens next

It should help you decide if you want to be screened.

## Who should be screened?

We are inviting all men in their 65th year to take part in the AAA screening programme because the condition is most common in men aged 65 and over. Any men aged over 65 who have not been screened before can ask for a screening appointment by contacting the screening programme office on 028 9063 1828.

**David, Newtownards**

***I saw a poster in the x-ray department when I brought my wife to the hospital. I thought it sounded like a good idea so I phoned for an appointment. I was pleased that I got a quick appointment and at how efficient it was. I was taken on time for my scan, which was very quick, and I was very happy to have the result straight away.***

## What is an AAA?

The aorta is the main artery that supplies blood to your body. It runs from your heart down through your chest and abdomen (stomach).

As some people get older, the wall of the aorta in the abdomen can become weak and balloon out to form an aneurysm, rather like a bulge in a worn car tyre. This is called an abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA).

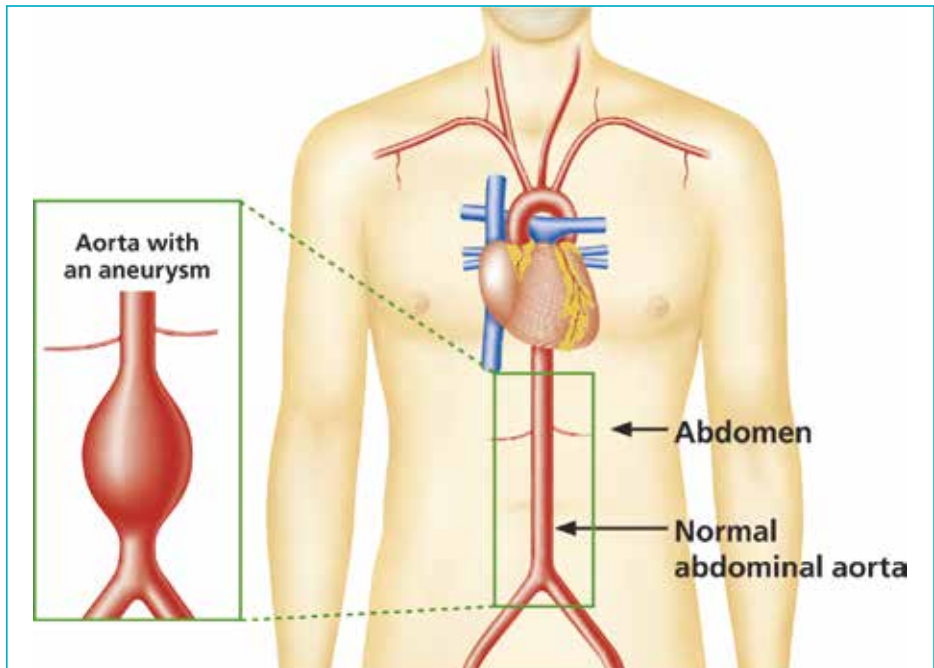


Diagram courtesy of the English NHS AAA Screening Programme

**If you have an AAA, you will usually not notice any symptoms. This means you cannot tell if you have one, as you will not feel any pain or notice anything different. You may feel completely healthy.**

## Is an AAA serious?

A normal aorta is less than 30mm wide. If your aorta is between 30–44mm wide, you have a small AAA. This is not serious, but it's important that the aneurysm is monitored to see if it grows.

If your aorta is between 45–54mm wide, you have a medium AAA. This could become serious if it continues to grow, so again it's important that the aneurysm is monitored. Most aneurysms grow very slowly, so men with a small or medium AAA may never develop a large AAA.

If your aorta is 55mm or more wide, you have a large AAA. **Large AAAs are rare but can be very serious.** As the wall of the aorta stretches, it becomes weaker and can rupture (burst). A ruptured aneurysm leads to serious internal bleeding, which is fatal in 85% of cases.

## How common is the condition?

Around 1 in 65 men screened in Northern Ireland at age 65 has an AAA. Men aged over 65 who have never been screened are at greater risk.

### Who is most at risk?

Men are six times more likely than women to have an AAA, which is why women are not offered screening. The risk of developing an AAA depends on your age and genes. Around 1 in 65 men aged 65 in Northern Ireland has an AAA, and if you are the close relative of an affected person, you are more likely to get one. However, most men are unaware of any family history of AAAs when theirs is detected.

Other factors known to increase the risk and size of AAAs are:

- smoking
- high cholesterol
- high blood pressure

**However, AAAs can occur in men who do not fall into any of the above categories.**

## Is there any way to prevent an AAA?

Research is ongoing but there is still no known way to prevent an AAA. Living a healthier lifestyle is the best way to reduce the risk of an AAA but it does not remove the possibility completely.

## Why is screening important?

**Screening is the most effective way to tell if you have an AAA because you are unlikely to have any symptoms or feel any pain.**

AAA screening involves a simple, painless ultrasound scan of your abdomen. This way, we can find aneurysms early and monitor or treat them. This greatly reduces the chance of an aneurysm rupturing (bursting) and causing serious problems.

## What is an ultrasound scan?

An ultrasound scan is a safe, painless and reliable test. It is very quick, usually taking about 10 minutes. The same technique is used to examine the development of a baby during pregnancy.

## How reliable is the ultrasound scan?

The scan used to find AAAs is very reliable. No screening test can be completely effective but it is very rare for a man who has had a normal result to later develop an aneurysm that needs an operation.

## Are there any risks from screening?

AAA screening saves lives by detecting large aneurysms before they rupture. However, AAA screening also detects large aneurysms that will be treated but which may not have ruptured or gone on to cause any harm if left untreated.

*William, Newtownards*

*I was nervous about coming for the scan because I don't attend the GP. My family encouraged me to come along and I'm glad that I did. I feel happy and relieved now that I have had the scan done.*

## What will happen at the screening appointment?

When you arrive at your local screening clinic, we will:

- check your personal details
- explain what will happen during the scan
- obtain your consent
- give you the chance to ask any questions.

For the scan, we will:

- ask you to lie down and lift up or unbutton your shirt – you will not need to undress
- put a cool jelly on your abdomen
- move a small scanner over the skin of your abdomen
- look at the image of your aorta on a screen and take measurements.

After the scan, we will:

- tell you the result straight away
- inform your GP of your result
- provide further information and support as necessary.



## There are four possible results

- **More than 98% of men have a normal result.**
- If your result is not normal, it will show a small, medium or large AAA.
- The result of your scan will be forwarded to your GP.
- Sometimes the person carrying out the scan will not be able to see the aorta clearly. This is nothing to worry about. They will arrange another appointment for you.

### Normal

This means you **do not have an AAA**. No monitoring is needed afterwards and **you will not be invited for screening again**. Men who have a normal result are very unlikely to develop an aneurysm that needs an operation later in life.

### Small AAA

Approximately 1 in 80 men screened in Northern Ireland has a small AAA. Most aneurysms grow very slowly and many men with a small AAA may never develop a medium or large AAA.

### What happens next?

- You will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.
- A vascular nurse specialist will contact you within two working days.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- Your GP may want to give you tablets, monitor your blood pressure and offer advice on a healthier lifestyle.
- It is important to check the size of your aneurysm regularly as you may need screened more frequently if it gets bigger.
- We will invite you for an ultrasound scan **every year** to monitor the growth of your aneurysm.

## Medium AAA

Approximately 1 in 550 men screened in Northern Ireland has a medium AAA. Most aneurysms grow very slowly and some men with a medium AAA may never develop a large AAA.

### What happens next?

- You will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.
- A vascular nurse specialist will contact you within two working days.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- Your GP may want to give you tablets, monitor your blood pressure and offer advice on a healthier lifestyle.
- It is important to check the size of your aneurysm regularly as you may need to be assessed for surgery if it gets bigger.
- We will invite you for an ultrasound scan **every three months** to monitor the growth of your aneurysm.

### Ken, Belfast

*When they found I had a small aneurysm, they told me it was nothing to worry about but that I would need tested every 12 months. They gave me reassurance. I have been kept well informed by the relevant people and have no concerns about it.*

## Large AAA

Approximately 1 in 800 men screened in Northern Ireland has a large AAA.

### What happens next?

- You will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.
- A vascular nurse specialist will contact you within one working day.
- We will refer you to a team of specialists (a hospital vascular team) who have expert knowledge of aneurysms.
- The specialists will carry out some tests, provide more detailed information and discuss your suitability for surgery.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- You may need to stop driving until your treatment is complete and you should check any health-related insurance, such as travel insurance. Your vascular nurse specialist will advise you on this.

**If you have been diagnosed with a large AAA and have any immediate concerns, you can contact the screening programme office on 028 9063 1828 prior to a specialist nurse contacting you. You can also contact your GP.**

### *Barry, Belfast*

*Two days after my initial scan that showed a large aneurysm, I had a pre-operation assessment with the surgeon, where everything was explained to me in great detail. A few days later, I presented myself at the hospital and soon after that my operation was over. I am glad to say it was a 100% success. A week later I was on my way home, still a bit uncomfortable, but able to get on with my life. I have no doubt that attending the scan when I did saved my life. It was so simple and over in 10 minutes.*

## What are the risks from an AAA?

**There is no risk from the ultrasound scan itself.**

Not every aneurysm will rupture (burst), but if it does, the chances of getting to hospital and surviving surgery are very poor. A ruptured AAA leads to serious internal bleeding, which is fatal in 85% of cases.

If you are screened and found to have a large AAA, you will be assessed for surgery to repair it. AAA surgery carries significant risks, as with any major operation, but the chances of recovery are much better than if the issue is ignored and the aneurysm later ruptures (bursts). The risks will be discussed in more detail with you by the team of specialists. On average, 98% of men survive the operation.

Screening does not completely remove the risk of an aneurysm rupturing but it is the best method of protection.

## Will AAA screening pick up other problems?

No. AAA screening is just to find out if you have an abdominal aortic aneurysm. It does not look for other health problems.

If you are worried about your health, you should speak to your GP.



## How will my AAA screening information be used?

The AAA screening programme in Northern Ireland will keep a record of your personal screening information including test results and scan images. Staff working for the programme may see and review your records. Any information relating to you will remain strictly confidential.

The information will be used to monitor and improve the quality of the programme and the expertise of screening staff. This is an important part of any screening programme. It may also be used for audit, research, education and training purposes within Health and Social Care. If this happens, your personal identification details will be removed.

## What are the benefits and risks of screening?

The AAA screening programme reduces the risk of dying from a ruptured aneurysm. It does this by detecting and treating large aneurysms before they rupture. Not every aneurysm will rupture, but if it does, the chances of getting to hospital and surviving surgery are very poor. A ruptured aneurysm leads to serious internal bleeding, which is fatal in 85% of cases.

If you are screened and found to have a large AAA, you will be assessed for surgery to repair it. AAA surgery carries significant risks, as with any major operation, but the chances of recovery are much better than if the issue is ignored and the aneurysm later ruptures. The risks will be discussed in detail with you by

the surgical team. On average, 98% of men survive the operation.

Screening does not completely remove the risk of an aneurysm rupturing, but it is the best method of protection.

All men with a large AAA detected by screening will be referred to the surgical team to have their treatment options discussed. This means some men will have surgery for a large AAA that may not have ruptured or gone on to cause any harm if left untreated. However, it is not possible to identify which aneurysms will rupture during a man's lifetime, and which won't.

There is no risk from the ultrasound scan itself.

## How can I find out more?

For more information about anything in this leaflet:

- call the AAA screening programme office on **028 9063 1828**
- visit the website: [www.aaascreening.info](http://www.aaascreening.info)
- contact your GP.

You can also get information and support from the Circulation Foundation, a UK charity for people who have vascular diseases. Visit their website at: [www.circulationfoundation.org.uk](http://www.circulationfoundation.org.uk)



**Public Health  
Agency**



**Abdominal Aortic  
Aneurysm Screening**

### **Public Health Agency**

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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