

# Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) screening

Things  
you  
need  
to know



Public Health  
Agency



A quick, free scan for men aged 65

## Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for all men in their 65<sup>th</sup> year who live in Northern Ireland. You are being invited to a **free** screening for an abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA).

## What is this leaflet about?

This leaflet tells you:

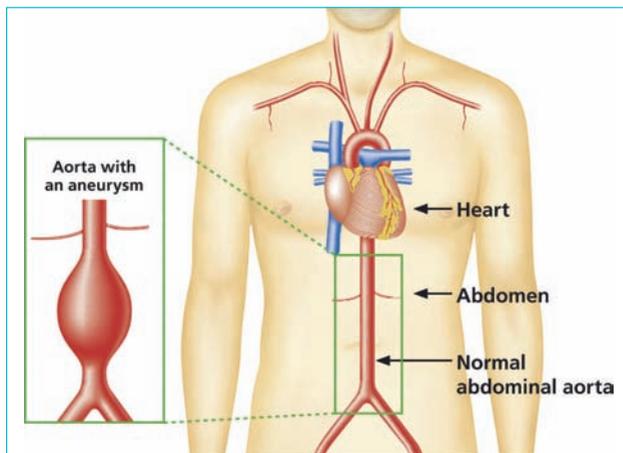
- what an AAA is
- what happens when you go for AAA screening.

This information should help you decide if you want to attend your AAA screening appointment.

## 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 (belly).

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).



### **If you have an AAA, you may not have 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.

## Who should be screened?

Men are six times more likely than women to have an AAA. 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.

Men over 65, who have never attended for AAA screening, can ask to be screened by contacting the central screening office on 028 9063 1828.

## Is an AAA serious?

If your aorta is between 30–44mm wide, you have a small AAA. This is not serious, but needs to be 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 it also needs to be monitored. Most AAAs 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, which is serious. As the wall of the aorta stretches, it becomes weaker, and it could give way and rupture (burst). A ruptured AAA leads to serious internal bleeding, which can be fatal.

## Why do we get AAAs?

The risk of developing an AAA depends on your age and genes. Around 1 in 40 men aged 65 in Northern Ireland have 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 different.

AAA screening involves a simple ultrasound scan of your abdomen. It is being offered to all men in their 65<sup>th</sup> year so we can find AAAs early and monitor or treat them. This greatly reduces the chance of an AAA rupturing (bursting) and causing serious problems.



NHS AAA Screening Programme

## 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.

## What will happen at the screening appointment?

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

- check your details
- explain what will happen during the scan
- give you the chance to ask some basic questions.

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

## What will my result say?

- There are four possible results.
- **Around 98% of men have a normal result.**
- If your result is not normal, it will show whether you have a small, medium or large AAA.
- The result of your scan will be forwarded to your GP.

### 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 AAA that needs an operation later in life.

### Small AAA

Approximately 1 in 55 men who go for screening will have a small AAA. Most AAAs grow very slowly and many men with a small AAA may never develop a medium or large AAA.

### What happens next?

- It is important to check the size of your AAA 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 AAA.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- You will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.
- Your GP may want to give you tablets, monitor your blood pressure and offer advice on a healthier lifestyle.

## Medium AAA

Approximately 1 in 250 men who go for screening will have a medium AAA. Most AAAs grow very slowly and some men with a medium AAA may never develop a large AAA.

### What happens next?

- It is important to check the size of your AAA 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 AAA.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- You will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.
- Your GP may want to give you tablets, monitor your blood pressure and offer advice on a healthier lifestyle.

## Large AAA

A small number of men, approximately 1 in 300 of those who go for screening, will have a large AAA.

### What happens next?

- We will refer you to a team of specialists (a hospital vascular team) who have expert knowledge of AAAs.
- 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 will get an information leaflet telling you what the result of your scan means.

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

## 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 AAA that needs an operation.



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.

## 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.

## What are the risks from an AAA?

Not every AAA will rupture (burst) but if it does, the chances of getting to hospital and surviving surgery are very poor. 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 AAA later ruptures (bursts). If you are found to have a large AAA, the risks will be discussed in more detail with you by the team of specialists.

## 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.

## How can I find out more?

For more information about anything in this leaflet:

- contact your GP
- visit [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)
- call the AAA central screening office on 028 9063 1828.

You can also get information and support from the Circulation Foundation. This is a UK charity for people who have diseases of the veins and arteries, known as vascular diseases, including AAAs.

### Circulation Foundation

Website: [www.circulationfoundation.org.uk](http://www.circulationfoundation.org.uk)

Telephone: 020 7304 4779



**Public Health Agency**, Ormeau Avenue Unit, 18 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast, BT2 8HS.

Tel: 028 9031 1611. Textphone/Text Relay: 18001 028 9031 1611.

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