

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 9615 1212.

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).

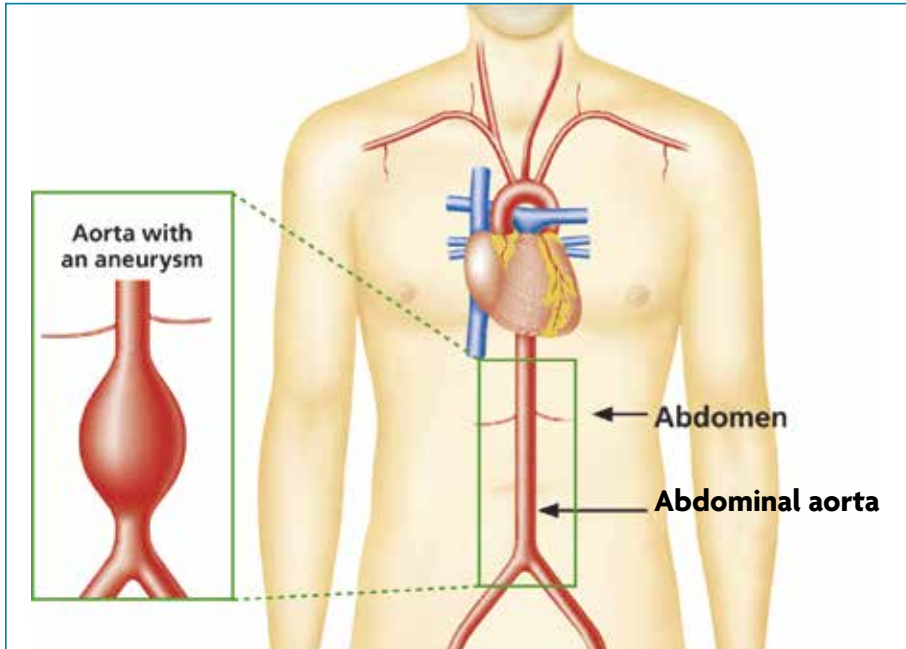


Diagram courtesy of the English NHS AAA Screening Programme

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?

The aorta is normally 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 burst. A burst aneurysm leads to serious internal bleeding, which is fatal in 8 out of 10 of cases.

How common is the condition?

Around 1 in 80 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. The risk of having an AAA increases if your brother, sister or parent has, or has had, an abdominal aortic aneurysm.

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?

AAA screening saves lives by detecting large aneurysms before they burst. 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 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 to develop a large aneurysm if no aneurysm is found by screening. Sometimes the person carrying out the scan will not be able to see the aorta clearly. This is nothing to worry about and they will ask you to have another scan, usually on a different day.

Are there any risks from screening?

There are no risks from the ultrasound scan used in screening. However, large aneurysms detected by screening may require treatment. Before considering any treatment the risks and benefits will be discussed.

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

No aneurysm detected

This means you **do not have an AAA**. No monitoring is needed afterwards and **you will not be invited for screening again** as you are very unlikely to develop an aneurysm that needs an operation later in life. The result of your scan will be forwarded to your GP.

More than 98% of men will not have an aneurysm detected.

Small AAA

Around 1 in 80 men screened 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.
- Following an AAA result please arrange a visit to your GP to have your height, weight and blood pressure checked.
- 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

Around 1 in 500 men screened 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.
- Following an AAA result please arrange a visit to your GP to have your height, weight and blood pressure checked.
- 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

Around 1 in 1000 men screened 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. Not everyone who has a large aneurysm will have an operation.
- You will receive a letter with the result of your scan and a copy will be sent to your GP.
- **During the time when a large AAA remains untreated, you may need to stop driving 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 9615 1212 prior to a specialist nurse contacting you. You can also contact your GP.



What are the risks from an AAA?

Not every aneurysm will burst, but if it does, the chances of getting to hospital and surviving surgery are very poor. A burst AAA leads to serious internal bleeding, which is fatal in 8 out of 10 cases.

If you are screened and found to have a large AAA, you will be assessed for your suitability 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 bursting 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?

It's up to you to decide if you want to be screened for AAA. There are clear benefits of screening, however you should also consider the possible risks.

Benefits:

- The ultrasound scan used in AAA screening is quick, painless and a straightforward process.
- An AAA will often cause few or no obvious symptoms, but if it's left to get bigger, it could burst and cause life-threatening bleeding inside your abdomen. About 8 in every 10 people who have a burst AAA die before they get to hospital or do not survive emergency surgery to repair it. We offer screening so we can find aneurysms early and monitor or treat them.
- AAA screening reduces the risk of dying from a burst aneurysm.
- Planned AAA surgery (such as AAAs identified through screening) is often very successful.

Risks:

There is no risk from the screening test itself, but there is a risk of:

- anxiety from being told you have a potentially life-threatening condition;
- serious complications of surgery carried out to treat an AAA.

Deciding to be screened

It may be helpful to consider the following information before deciding if you would like to take part in AAA screening:

- AAA screening may identify a AAA which may not go on to have a burst or cause any harm if left untreated. However, it is not possible to identify which aneurysms will burst during a man's lifetime, and which won't.
- During the time when a large AAA is untreated you may need to stop driving and to check health-related insurance, such as travel insurance.
- AAA screening does not completely remove the risk of an aneurysm bursting; however, it is the best method of protection.

Opting out of screening

Taking part in screening is a personal choice. Please contact the AAA screening programme office on **028 9615 1212** if you would like to discuss opting out of the screening programme.

How can I find out more?

For more information or this leaflet in another language or format:

- call the AAA screening programme office on **028 9615 1212**
- visit the websites: nidirect.gov.uk/aaa
or www.publichealth.hscni.net
- 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



Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

Find us on:

