

## NHS Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Screening Programme - Background information -

The NHS Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Screening Programme is being introduced gradually across England from spring 2009. The aim of the Programme is to reduce deaths from abdominal aortic aneurysms (also called 'AAAs' or 'Triple As') through early detection.

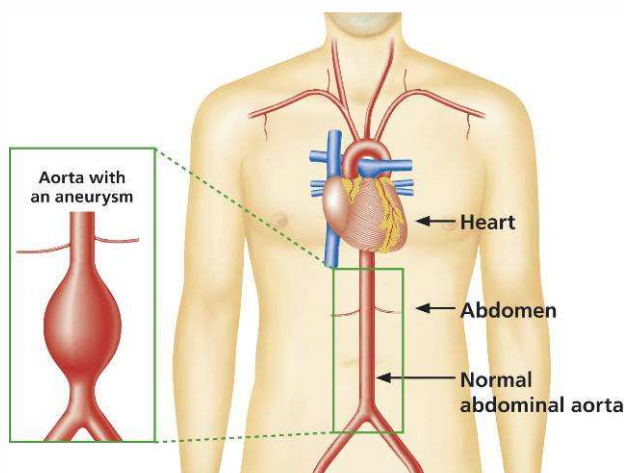
Once fully implemented, the Programme will invite all men for screening during the year that they turn 65. Men who have an aneurysm detected through screening will be offered treatment or monitoring depending on the size of the aneurysm.

The NHS AAA Screening Programme will be coordinated and led nationally. Local screening services will be delivered by Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) who will provide screening for their population in line with national quality standards and protocols.

### The condition

The aorta is the main blood vessel that supplies blood to the body. It runs from the heart down through the chest and abdomen.

In some people, as they get older, the wall of the aorta in the abdomen can become weak. It can then start to expand and forms what is called an abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA). The condition is most common among men aged 65 and above.



Large aneurysms are rare but can be very serious. As the wall of the aorta stretches it becomes weaker and could give way. This is known as aneurysm rupture and is usually fatal. A smaller aneurysm is not dangerous, however aneurysms can grow and it is therefore important to monitor the size.

The condition is particularly serious because it does not have any symptoms. However, treatment for AAAs detected through screening is highly effective.



## The screening process

Once the programme is implemented fully all men registered with a GP will receive an invitation for screening in the year that they turn 65. Invitations will be sent from the local screening centre directly to men. Men over 65 who have not been screened previously or treated for an AAA will be able to request screening once the programme is available in their area.

Screening all men at 65 will:

- identify aneurysms that need monitoring,
- discover aneurysms that could rupture, enabling treatment to be offered
- reassure men who don't have an aneurysm.

An ultrasound scan of the abdomen is used to detect AAAs. The scan will be carried out by a screener who is specially trained to work within the NHS AAA Screening Programme. The scan itself is quick, painless and non-invasive and the results are provided straight away.

## The results

Results will be given verbally and in writing to all men immediately after the scan. A letter giving the results will also be sent to the man's GP.

There are three possible results from the scan:

- **Normal result:** The aorta has a diameter of 3cm or less. No aneurysm has been detected. The man will be informed of his result and will not require any further scans
- **Small aneurysm:** The aorta is slightly enlarged and has a diameter of between 3 and 5.4 cm. Men with a small aneurysm will not need to have treatment but will be invited to have follow up scans to monitor the size of the aneurysm. If the aorta is:
  - between **3 and 4.4cm** a follow-up scan will be offered in a year
  - between **4.5 and 5.4cm** a follow-up scan will be offered in three months

In addition to follow up scans men will be offered advice on how to reduce their cardiovascular risk factors. The man's GP may also be informed of the need to review medication and reassess blood pressure monitoring

- **Large aneurysm:** The aorta has a diameter of over 5.5 cm. Men with a large aneurysm will be referred to a consultant vascular surgeon to discuss treatment.



## **Scientific evidence to support screening**

The NHS AAA Screening Programme has been introduced following research and analysis of data from existing local screening programmes in England which show a reduction in mortality from AAAs when men are offered ultrasound screening in their 65<sup>th</sup> year.

The evidence was assessed by the National Screening Committee (NSC) against a set of internationally recognised criteria which have confirmed that screening all men aged 65 can deliver benefits to men at a reasonable cost.

## **Incidence and mortality**

- There are around 6,000 deaths each year in England and Wales resulting from ruptured AAAs
- Deaths from ruptured AAAs account for around 2% of all deaths in men aged 65 and over
- Around 4 per cent of men aged between 65 and 74 have an AAA. This equates to around 80,000 men. Most of these are not serious
- 95 percent of ruptured AAAs are in men over 65
- Vascular disease (including death from ruptured AAAs) accounts for 40 per cent of deaths in the UK. Vascular disease is as common as both cancer and heart disease.

## **Risk factors**

- The biggest risk factors for developing an AAA are age and being male
- The risk of having an AAA increases with age
- The condition is six times more common in men than women
- The risk of having an AAA is also increased by smoking, having high blood pressure or having a brother, sister or parent who has had the condition.

## **Information for men**

All men invited for screening will be provided with a copy of a national information leaflet which provides information about the screening programme, the test and the possible outcomes. This will enable men to make an informed choice about whether or not to accept their invitation. Men who have an aneurysm detected will also be provided with a specially prepared leaflet about the condition. Men will also be given a phone number for their local screening centre or vascular unit which they can contact if they have further questions following their results.



Further information on the NHS Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Screening Programme can be found at <http://aaa.screening.nhs.uk>

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