



Version 3 February 2015

Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm (AAA) Screening Programme

General Information

www.aaascreening.wales.nhs.uk



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This leaflet is available in alternative formats, for example large print or Braille. Please call your local screening office on the number in your invitation letter.

Abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) screening summary

- The aorta is the main blood vessel that supplies blood to the body. Sometimes the wall of the aorta in the abdomen can become weak and stretch to form an aneurysm. When this happens there is a risk that the aorta may split or tear (rupture).
- We will invite you for AAA screening if you are a man, aged 65, who lives in Wales and who is registered with a GP practice.
- The aim of the screening programme is to reduce the number of ruptured AAA and deaths.
- AAA screening involves a simple ultrasound scan to measure the abdominal aorta.
- The scan is usually painless but may be slightly uncomfortable due to pressure on the abdomen.
- It is a free NHS screening test.
- If you are not in the screening age group and are concerned that you may have an AAA or are worried about a family history of AAA, you should speak to your GP.
- Like all medical tests, AAA screening is not 100% accurate.

This leaflet tells you about screening for an abdominal aortic aneurysm, also called AAA. It aims to help you choose whether or not to take part in the NHS Wales AAA Screening Programme.

What is an AAA?

The aorta is the main blood vessel that supplies blood to the body. Sometimes the wall of the aorta in the abdomen can become weak and stretch to form an aneurysm. When this happens there is a risk that the aorta may split or tear (rupture).

Diagram to show a normal aorta and an aorta with an aneurysm

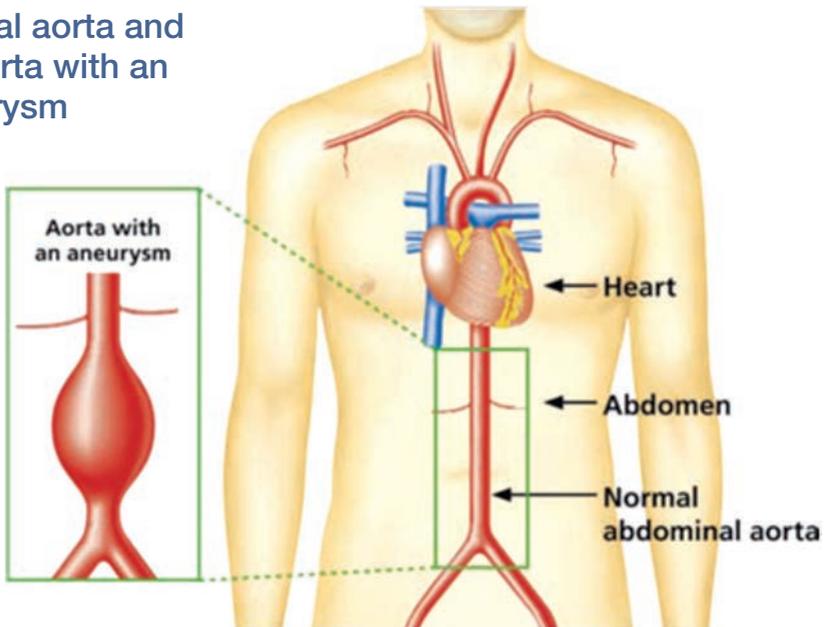


Image courtesy of the NHS Screening Programme (England)

Who is most at risk of an AAA?

An AAA can happen to anybody but it is most common in men aged 65 and over who:

- smoke;
- have high blood pressure;
- have high cholesterol; or
- have a family history of AAA.

Anyone known to have a close family history of AAA, and who is not invited for screening (for example, men who are not aged 65, women) should discuss any concerns they may have with their GP.

Is having an AAA serious?

When the abdominal aorta is swollen, it is not as strong as a normal blood vessel. This can lead to the vessel wall splitting or tearing, which is called a rupture.

The AAA is measured by ultrasound scan and the result can either be:

- small;
- medium; or
- large.

A small or medium AAA carries less risk of rupture than a large AAA.

A ruptured AAA can lead to serious blood loss that will need **immediate** emergency treatment. Not every AAA will rupture but if it does, the chances of getting to hospital and surviving surgery are very poor.

If we screen you and find that you have a large AAA, we will refer



you to a specialist team at a hospital who will assess you for treatment to repair your AAA and prevent a possible rupture.

What is AAA Screening?

AAA screening involves having an ultrasound scan to measure the size of your abdominal aorta. It is the best way of detecting an AAA.

To have a clear scan of your abdominal aorta the screener may need to press firmly on your abdomen.

The ultrasound scan for AAA screening only takes a few minutes.

Who do you invite for AAA screening?

We will invite men aged 65 to be screened if they live in Wales and are registered with a GP practice.

What about men over 65?

If you are over 65 and have never been for an NHS AAA screening scan, you can ask for a scan by contacting your local screening programme.

Why are women not offered screening for AAA?

Men are six times more likely to have an AAA than women. Ruptured AAA is less common in women and on average happens 10 years later than in men. At the moment the National Screening Committee does not recommend offering women screening for AAA. Women who have a family history of AAA should speak to their GP, who will be able to advise them.

Will AAA screening pick up other problems?

No. AAA screening is just to find out if you have an AAA. It does not look for other health problems. If you are worried about your health, you should speak to your GP.

Why is screening important?

Usually, you cannot tell if you have an AAA, as there are **no signs or symptoms**. This means that if you have an AAA, you may not feel any pain or notice anything different.

If you go to AAA screening, we can find an AAA earlier and offer you monitoring or treatment.

The easiest way to find out if you have an AAA is by having a simple ultrasound scan of your abdomen.

Is AAA screening accurate?

The scan used to find an AAA is very reliable but like any medical test, AAA screening is not 100% accurate.



Sometimes results can be reported wrongly but this is very rare. This means that a person may be told that they have an AAA when in fact they don't or a person may be told that they don't have an AAA when in fact they do.

Where will I be screened?

We will be running screening clinics throughout Wales. Screening clinics may be held in different places, from GP practices to community hospitals or health clinics.

You will find information on where **you** will be screened (and the contact number of your local screening office, if you need to rearrange your appointment) in your invitation letter.

What will happen when I go for screening?

Your screening appointment will usually take about 10 to 15 minutes.

The screener is the trained person who will check your personal details when you arrive, ask for your consent (permission) and carry out your ultrasound scan.

If you are worried about anything you can ask the screener at any time.

What is an ultrasound scan?

An ultrasound machine uses sound waves to create an image on a computer screen.

How is the ultrasound scan done?

The screener will explain what will happen during the scan.

You will not need to undress.





The screener will ask you to lie on your back and to lift up your shirt or top so that they can see your abdomen.

The screener will put some clear gel on your abdomen and pass an ultrasound probe over your abdomen.

So that the screener can get a clear image of the abdominal aorta, they may need to apply some pressure when using the probe.

An image of the aorta is displayed on a monitor. The screener will measure the size of the aorta to see if an AAA is present.



Results

The screener will give you your results following your scan.

The four possible results that you may get after your ultrasound scan are as follows.

Normal result

This means your abdominal aorta is **not enlarged** – there is **no AAA**. You don't need treatment or monitoring. We will not call you back for AAA screening again.

Small to medium AAA

This means your abdominal aorta is a little wider than normal and **you have an AAA**. We will invite you to have regular ultrasound scans to check the size of your AAA. How often you will need

a scan will depend on the size of your AAA. You may also need medication, which will be prescribed by your GP.

Large AAA

This means your abdominal aorta is much wider than normal **and you have an AAA**. We will refer you to a specialist team at a hospital who will carry out more tests and talk with you about your options for treatment.

Treatment may include having an operation. For a small number of men, an operation will not be possible.

Some AAA operations carry significant risks but the chances of recovery are much better if the operation is planned.

Following your visit with the specialist team they will tell you whether you need to tell the DVLA (Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency) or not.

If you have any size AAA and are planning a holiday you should tell your travel insurance provider.

Non-visualised

In very rare cases the screener may not be able to measure your abdominal aorta and we will offer you further scans. **This is nothing for you to worry about.** This may happen for a number of reasons and the screener will explain this to you during the screening appointment.

How do you get my personal details?

We get your name and address from a national database called the Welsh Demographic Service which is managed by the NHS Wales Informatics Service. This database holds a record of names and addresses for every person living in Wales who is registered with a GP.

How will you use my details and information?

We need to keep your personal information so we know if and when you have had a scan or whether you have decided not to have one. It also helps us to keep track of who we have (or have not) invited for screening and to deal with follow-up enquiries.

Strict laws on how we manage your information mean that only staff involved directly in your screening can see your personal details. We only pass on your personal information to those who need to know, including your own GP and, if you have an AAA, to the specialist team at the hospital.

If we screen you and find that you have an AAA, we will need to share your information with other health professionals and your GP to support further investigation and possible surgery. We will also need access to information about any AAA treatment you may need now or in the future. We also access information about any AAA treatment provided to men who did not attend for screening, to ensure that the NHS Wales AAA Screening Programme is achieving its aim to reduce the number of ruptured AAA and deaths. **If you do not want us to be able to access this information about you, please let us know.**

We may use your information for research purposes but we will not identify you by name. We may also invite you to take part in research linked to the screening programme. If another organisation asks for information that could identify you, we will ask your permission before passing on information about you.

Where can I find more information?

If you need any more information you can:

- phone us;
- ask your GP or health-care professional; or
- visit the following websites.

Wales Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm Screening Programme

www.aaascreening.wales.nhs.uk

NHS Direct Wales:

Using your information when you access the service

www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/aboutus/yourinformation

Circulation Foundation

(a charity supporting people with vascular disease)

Phone: 020 7869 6938

www.circulationfoundation.org.uk

For help giving up smoking: **Stop Smoking Wales**

Phone: 0800 085 2219

If you want to change your appointment, you can contact your local screening centre.

South East Wales

Phone: 01443 23 51 61

West Wales

Phone: 01792 45 31 62

North Wales

Phone: 01492 86 35 63

Things you need to know about AAA

The following information is based on the best available evidence.

- About 95 men out of 100 (95%) who are screened for an AAA will have a normal result
- A **normal** aorta measures less than 3cm in diameter
- A **small** AAA measures between 3 and 4.4cm in diameter
- A **medium** AAA measures between 4.5 and 5.4 cm in diameter
- About four men out of 100 (4%) will have a small or medium sized AAA
- A **large** AAA measures 5.5cms or over
- Six men out of 1,000 (0.6%) will have a large AAA

