

VascularWeb

Walking for Claudication

Leg artery disease (peripheral arterial disease or PAD) can cause discomfort or pain when you walk. While the pain most often occurs in the calf it can also occur in your hips, buttocks, thighs, knees, shins, or upper feet. This pain is called intermittent claudication.

Claudication is discomfort or pain in your legs that happens when you walk and goes away when you rest. You may not always feel pain; instead you may feel a tightness, heaviness, cramping, or weakness in your legs. Claudication often occurs more quickly if you walk uphill or up a flight of stairs or more rapidly than usual. Over time, if your PAD worsens, you may begin to feel claudication beginning at shorter walking distances.

What can I do to help claudication?

Your physician will give you a specific treatment plan for your PAD, which may include lifestyle changes like quitting smoking and losing weight. Your physician may also recommend a walking program to help your body compensate to improve the blood flow and decrease the pain that you feel in your legs. Walking programs, when carefully followed, can double or quadruple the distances you can walk without pain.

Your vascular specialist will tailor your walking program to you, but walking programs generally follow similar guidelines. Your walking program will work best if you:

- Walk three or more times per week
- Increase the amount of time that you can walk without reproducing the pain in your legs by gradually walking for longer and longer periods without stopping
- Avoid tobacco completely
- Maintain your ideal body weight

You will need to maintain the walking program for at least three to six months to maximize benefits from it.

Although your physician will tailor your walking program to your specific needs, typically sessions contain the following elements:

- At first, you should walk until you feel mild leg pain, often about three to five minutes after starting
- Continue walking until the pain becomes moderate to severe (on a scale of one to five, the pain is three or more)
- Then stop and rest until the pain goes away, usually after a few minutes
- After the pain goes away, begin walking again
- Repeat this cycle of exercise and rest for a total of 30 to 35 minutes
- As your program continues, gradually increase the time you walk to a total of 50 minutes to one hour
- As you progress in your walking program, you will usually be able to walk for longer periods of time without pain

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