

Choosing Wisely[®]

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American Association of Neurological Surgeons



ACNS



Screening tests for brain aneurysms

When you need them—and when you don't

A brain aneurysm is a weak area in the wall of a blood vessel in the brain. It can burst and cause a stroke, and can even lead to death.

Doctors use imaging tests—like CT scans or MRIs—to screen for brain aneurysms. That may sound like a good idea. But the tests and follow-up can do more harm than good. Here's why:

Screening tests can lead to unneeded follow-up and treatment.

Brain aneurysms are rare. So when doctors order imaging tests, they usually don't find any aneurysms. That means patients are exposed to risks without any benefit.

Sometimes, a CT scan or MRI will show something on the image that is unclear. This can lead to more tests, which may add to your risks.

A CT scan or MRI might also find small “incidental aneurysms” that may never be a problem.



Imaging tests cost a lot and have risks.

Depending on your insurance, a CT scan or MRI of the head can cost from \$650 to \$1,000. Follow-up testing or treatment can add a lot to the costs.

Also, CT scans expose you to radiation.

When do you need screening tests for brain aneurysms?

Screening tests can be a good idea if:

- You had a brain aneurysm in the past.
- You had a type of stroke called a subarachnoid hemorrhage. It's caused when an aneurysm bursts and there's bleeding between the brain and the tissue around it.
- You have two or more close relatives who have had aneurysms.
- You have other risks for aneurysms, such as these genetic conditions: Marfan Syndrome, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome IV, or Polycystic kidney disease.

You may need to be evaluated if you have symptoms of a burst aneurysm.

The main symptom is an unusual, sudden, severe headache. Often patients say it's "the worst headache of my life." Other symptoms may include:

- A stiff neck
- Pain in the face
- Seeing double
- Light sensitivity
- Vision loss
- Odd eye movements
- A seizure or change in speech or alertness

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Tips for preventing stroke

Brain aneurysms are one of many causes of strokes. The tips below may help you reduce your risk of stroke.

Make healthy lifestyle choices.

- Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Don't eat processed foods.
- Eat less than one teaspoon of table salt (2,300 mg sodium) per day.
- If you drink alcohol, have no more than two drinks a day if you're a man, or no more than one drink a day if you're a woman.
- Get 30 minutes of moderate exercise most days of the week.
- Keep a healthy weight. Ask your doctor what's right for you and how to keep it.
- If you use tobacco, quit—or don't start.

Have your blood levels and pulse checked.

- Watch your blood pressure. If it's above normal, try the lifestyle changes above. If it's high, your doctor may prescribe medication.
- Keep your cholesterol level in a healthy range. If it's too high, try lifestyle changes.
- Keep diabetes under control. Manage blood sugar levels and keep blood pressure and cholesterol at healthy levels.
- Getting your pulse and blood pressure checked at every doctor's appointment can help show irregular heart rhythms.

