

Buerger's Disease

What Is Buerger's Disease?

Thromboangiitis obliterans (TAO), also known as Buerger's disease, is a rare disease that occurs when smaller arteries and veins in the arms and/or legs become inflamed. This frequently leads to insufficient blood flow to skin tissue in the hands and feet. It may cause pain at rest or cause **claudication**, pain that comes with exercise. Sores that are slow to heal may also develop. It affects about eight to 11 people per 100,000 in North America.

TAO is different from peripheral artery disease (PAD) because **atherosclerosis** (plaque buildup) does not cause it. In rare cases, TAO can lead to **chronic limb-threatening ischemia (CLTI)**. This is a severe blockage of the arteries.

Symptoms

Symptoms of TAO are:

- Coldness, numbness, or tingling in their feet and hands
- Open wounds or sores on the feet or hands
- Pain in the leg or foot when exercising. Pain may worsen and eventually become more frequent, occurring at night while lying in bed.

Risk Factors

- Mostly found in people with a history of tobacco exposure of any kind, including smoking, chewing, or snuff
- Age (predominately 20 to 40 years old)
- More common in men
- High cholesterol, high blood pressure, or diabetes

Diagnosis

There are several key factors, characteristics, or individual complaints that physicians use to diagnose this disease. Some of them include:

- Rest pain or ulceration in people under age 50.
- History of tobacco use.
- No other explanation for artery blockage or clot development. A physician would want to be sure that a clot did not develop from the heart or a large blood vessel and travel to the arm or leg (also known as an **embolus**).

Clinicians may perform the following tests to confirm whether arteries are blocked:

- Artery blood flow measurements tests like ankle brachial index (ABI) or ultrasound
- **Arteriography**, when dye is injected into the blood vessels to get pictures of the affected blood vessel
- Biopsy of the affected artery

Treatment

The most effective, immediate treatment for TAO is smoking cessation. Even a few cigarettes a day can worsen the disease. Quitting tobacco use will improve health outcomes and prevent potential amputation. *Ask your health care provider about the type of smoking cessation program that works best for you.*

For more information, review this related flyer:

- Focus on Ischemia

Lifestyle and Managing TAO at Home

Although there is no cure for TAO, the Mayo Clinic suggests a few things to prevent worsening symptoms or to manage pain:



- **Exercise:** At least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week (such as walking or biking) can help ease pain.



- **Skin care:** Since TAO leads to loss of feeling or sensation, check for cuts and scrapes on fingers and toes daily. This protects you from infection that may lead to more serious problems. Make sure to clean any cut with soap and water, apply antibiotic ointment if available, and cover with a clean bandage. *If a cut is taking a long time to heal or is getting worse, contact your health care provider right away.*

Questions for Your Doctor

It is important to work closely with your health care provider about your diagnosis and treatment. You can bring this form with you to help talk to your medical provider about any questions and concerns you may have.

