

Three Tests May Foil  
Artery-Disease Deaths  
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Three simple tests that can potentially save thousands of lives from strokes, aneurysms or other arterial problems are getting a big endorsement today. But sometimes getting accurate tests at a reasonable price can be a complex endeavor.

As of today, the Society for Vascular Surgery, representing the nation's 2,400 vascular surgeons, is for the first time recommending these three tests to screen for artery disease in many people 55 years old and over.

One screening exam is a carotid ultrasound to detect fatty plaque in neck arteries that could lead to a stroke. The second is an "ankle-brachial" test to detect fatty plaque buildup in arteries in the legs and throughout the body. The third is an abdominal ultrasound to see if the body's main artery, the aorta, has a potentially dangerous bulge called an aneurysm.

Different forms of these screening tests are available from medical societies, hospitals and commercial enterprises at prices ranging from free to more than \$1,000, doctors say. So how can people be sure they are getting accurate tests at a fair price?

"That's the \$64 million question," says Dartmouth Medical School vascular surgeon Robert M. Zwolak, a leader in the effort to get these screening tests widely embraced. He suggests that patients start their search by looking into screening programs made available free by vascular medical groups and listed at [www.vascularweb.org](http://www.vascularweb.org).

The Society for Vascular Surgery is recommending these tests for anyone age 55 or older with "cardiovascular risk factors." These include high blood pressure, diabetes, smoking, high cholesterol, known cardiovascular disease or a family history of abdominal aortic aneurysm. Often, such people can be at risk without knowing it.

William R. Flinn, chief of vascular surgery at the University of Maryland, says he was startled by the results of a carotid-artery screening program he directed at 17 sites. About 13% of the seemingly healthy people over 55 who were screened by carotid ultrasound turned out to have significant blockage in the carotid arteries in the neck.

Many such people can be treated with statin drugs and blood thinners, and won't need surgery. Some will have enough blockage that invasive treatment like surgery is needed. Dr. Flinn says many people in his research didn't know they had a problem.

He estimates one-third to one-half of the nation's 700,000 annual strokes are caused by such obstruction in the carotid arteries. And many of these people's conditions are very treatable.

A series of studies have shown that people with serious blockage of the carotid arteries can benefit from surgery to clear them out. Among the most recent large studies on this point was one published in Lancet, the English medical journal, in May 2004. This European study looked at 3,120 patients age 75 or older, with 70% or greater blockage in a carotid artery. Twelve percent had strokes during the next five years if they were treated only with drugs. A carotid operation to clear out plaque cut that stroke risk in half, to 6%.

So where should people get such a test? Dr. Zwolak recommends that if patients can't find a screening site at [www.vascularweb.org](http://www.vascularweb.org) -- and there are few such screenings currently scheduled -- they should check a local hospital. Some offer free screenings, but the list price at many hospitals for the three exams can top \$1,000. Other options are to check "vascular screening" on a Web search site.

Another is a nationwide commercial company, Life Line Screening, that offers all three tests, plus one for osteoporosis, for a total of \$129, or \$45 each. But some studies have shown variations in results among medical labs, especially on the carotid test.

Life Line Screening said its tests have been independently verified by two outside studies, one in 1998 by the University of South Florida and one in 2002 by the Cleveland Clinic.

The test for aneurysms in the abdominal aorta now is paid for by Medicare, but only in an initial exam when people turn 65. The "ankle-brachial" exam is available at many doctors' offices.

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