

# Patient Education: Vasculitis

## What It Is

Vasculitis is a condition where your blood vessels become inflamed (swollen and irritated).

This inflammation can make the blood vessels weaker, narrower, or even blocked.

Blood vessels carry oxygen and nutrients to your body. When they are damaged, organs and tissues may not get enough blood, which can cause problems.

## Causes & Risk Factors

Vasculitis can happen for different reasons:

- **Autoimmune reaction** – your immune system attacks your own blood vessels.
- **Infections** – such as hepatitis B or C.
- **Medications** – certain drugs may trigger it.
- **Other diseases** – like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, or certain cancers.
- **Unknown causes** – sometimes doctors can't find a specific reason.

Risk factors include:

- Being between 15–40 or over 60 (depending on the type of vasculitis)
- Having another autoimmune disease
- Certain chronic infections
- Family history of autoimmune conditions

## Signs & Symptoms

These may vary depending on which blood vessels are affected, but common symptoms include:

- Fever
- Fatigue (feeling very tired)
- Weight loss without trying
- Muscle aches
- Joint pain or swelling
- Skin changes (rash, red or purple spots)
- Nerve changes (numbness, tingling, weakness)
- Shortness of breath or chest pain
- Abdominal pain or blood in stool/urine

**Early warning signs** to watch for:

- New or worsening rash
- Sudden weakness or numbness in a limb
- Shortness of breath
- Unusual bleeding or bruising

**Complications if Untreated or Patient Noncompliance**

- Permanent organ damage (kidneys, lungs, brain, heart)
- Stroke or heart attack
- Nerve damage
- Severe infections

- Death in rare cases

## Treatment & Self-Care

Treatment depends on the type and severity. The goal is to reduce inflammation and prevent damage.

### Common treatments:

1. **Corticosteroids** (Prednisone) – reduce inflammation quickly
  - **Side effects:** weight gain, mood changes, high blood sugar, increased infection risk
2. **Immunosuppressants** (Methotrexate, Azathioprine, Cyclophosphamide) – calm the immune system
  - **Side effects:** low blood counts, nausea, higher infection risk
3. **Biologic medicines** (Rituximab) – target specific immune cells
  - **Side effects:** infusion reactions, infections

### Self-care tips:

- Take medications exactly as prescribed.
- Get regular lab work and checkups.
- Rest when tired but try to do gentle activity as able.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet.

## Dietary Needs

- Limit salt (especially if on steroids to reduce swelling and blood pressure).
- Eat foods rich in calcium and vitamin D to protect bones.

- Include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
- Avoid raw or undercooked meat/fish to lower infection risk.

## **Lifestyle Changes**

- Quit smoking (damages blood vessels more).
- Limit alcohol (can interact with medicines).
- Protect skin from injury and infection.
- Manage stress with relaxation techniques.

## **Safety Considerations**

- Avoid crowds and sick people when on immune-suppressing medicines.
- Wash hands often.
- Report fever, chills, or unusual symptoms right away.
- Keep vaccinations up to date (ask your doctor which ones are safe).

## **Prevention & Maintenance Tips**

- Stick to your medication schedule.
- Keep follow-up appointments.
- Monitor for early warning signs.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle to keep your immune system balanced.

## **When to Call for Help**

## Call Your Home Health Agency or Doctor If You:

- Develop a low-grade fever (100–101°F)
- Notice mild rash, joint pain, or muscle aches
- Have increased fatigue
- See new bruising or small red spots on skin
- Have mild swelling in ankles or feet

## Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room If You:

- Have chest pain or trouble breathing
- Suddenly can't move an arm or leg
- Have slurred speech or confusion
- Have very high fever (over 102°F)
- See large amounts of blood in urine or stool
- Have sudden, severe headache

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## Patient Homework / Assessment

**Instructions:** Choose “True” or “False” for each statement. If the statement is false, correct it.

1. True or False: Vasculitis means your blood vessels are inflamed.
2. True or False: Vasculitis can only affect your skin.
3. True or False: Taking your medications as prescribed can prevent organ damage.
4. True or False: One symptom of vasculitis is unexplained weight loss.
5. True or False: Smoking can make vasculitis worse.

6. True or False: You should eat more salt when taking steroids.
7. True or False: Some medicines for vasculitis can lower your immune system.
8. True or False: Fatigue is a common symptom of vasculitis.
9. True or False: You can stop your medicine once you feel better.
10. True or False: Fever should always be reported to your doctor.
11. True or False: Vasculitis can damage organs like the kidneys and heart.
12. True or False: Washing your hands often can lower your infection risk.
13. True or False: Corticosteroids can cause weight gain and mood changes.
14. True or False: You should avoid raw meat or fish while on immunosuppressants.
15. True or False: Mild joint pain should be reported to your doctor.
16. True or False: Severe shortness of breath is a reason to call 911.
17. True or False: You should keep all follow-up appointments.
18. True or False: Vasculitis always goes away without treatment.
19. True or False: Stress management can help improve overall health.
20. True or False: You should limit alcohol while taking medicine for vasculitis.

## **Individualized Patient Questions**

1. What type of vasculitis were you diagnosed with?
2. Which organs are affected in your case?
3. What medications are you currently taking, and what are their doses?
4. When was your last lab work done? What were the results?
5. Have you noticed any new symptoms since your last visit?

6. Are you following a low-salt diet?
7. How many hours of sleep do you get at night?
8. Have you had any recent infections?
9. Do you smoke or drink alcohol?
10. How often do you check your blood pressure?
11. Are you taking calcium and vitamin D supplements?
12. Have you had your vaccinations reviewed by your doctor?
13. Do you know your emergency symptoms and when to call 911?
14. Have you been able to keep all your appointments?
15. How do you manage stress day-to-day?
16. Do you have help at home if your condition worsens?
17. How much fluid do you drink daily?
18. Are you doing light exercise as recommended?
19. Do you have any medication side effects to report?
20. What's your biggest challenge in managing your vasculitis right now?

## Answer Key – Vasculitis

1. **True** — Vasculitis means inflammation (swelling and irritation) of the blood vessels.
2. **False** — Vasculitis can affect many organs, not just the skin. It can affect kidneys, lungs, heart, nerves, and more.
3. **True** — Taking medications exactly as prescribed helps prevent damage to organs.

4. **True** — Unexplained weight loss is a common symptom of vasculitis.
5. **True** — Smoking harms blood vessels and can worsen vasculitis.
6. **False** — Salt intake should be limited, especially when taking steroids, to avoid swelling and high blood pressure.
7. **True** — Some medicines for vasculitis lower your immune system, increasing infection risk.
8. **True** — Feeling tired or fatigued is a common symptom of vasculitis.
9. **False** — You should never stop your medicine without talking to your doctor, even if you feel better.
10. **True** — Fever may signal infection or a flare and should be reported to your doctor.
11. **True** — Vasculitis can damage organs such as the kidneys and heart if untreated.
12. **True** — Washing hands often helps lower the risk of infections, especially when on immunosuppressants.
13. **True** — Corticosteroids can cause weight gain and mood changes among other side effects.
14. **True** — Avoid raw or undercooked meat or fish to reduce infection risk while on immune-suppressing medicines.
15. **True** — Mild joint pain may signal disease activity and should be reported.
16. **True** — Severe shortness of breath can be a medical emergency and requires calling 911.
17. **True** — Keeping follow-up appointments is important to monitor your health.
18. **False** — Vasculitis usually requires treatment and does not always go away on its own.
19. **True** — Managing stress can improve overall health and help with disease management.
20. **True** — Alcohol can interfere with medications and weaken your immune system, so it should be limited.