

Your Journey with Lower Limb Ischemia



For more information scan this QR code or go to myhealth.alberta.ca/lower-limb-ischemia-pathway

Lower limb ischemia occurs when blood vessels in your leg(s) get restricted or blocked which causes pain, often with activity. This restriction in blood-flow can also affect how quickly your body can heal things like skin ulcers or wounds. You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you to know what to expect as you work with your healthcare team to manage and treat lower limb ischemia. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your healthcare team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your Journey.

Before your appointment (page 4)

- Write down how you feel, and your questions, symptoms and concerns.
- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.



Visit your healthcare provider (page 5)

- Share all of your symptoms and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.
- In order to better manage your health condition, your healthcare provider needs to hear from you and understand who you are and what matters to you.



Get your tests (page 7)

Your tests may include:

- Bloodwork
- Ankle-Foot Brachial Index (compares blood pressure in your arms to your legs)
- Doppler ultrasound (used to check blood-flow in your blood vessels)
- Toe pressure (a measurement of blood pressure in your big toe)



Review your test results (page 7)

- Find your test results on My Health Records or My AHS Connect (myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords) or ask your healthcare provider to print them off for you.
- Talk with your healthcare provider so you know what your test results mean.



Review your treatment & management options (page 9)

- Your health care provider will help you with medication, as well as with lifestyle and diet modifications that focus on the health of your heart and blood vessels.
- Your health care provider will also coach you on what signs & symptoms to watch for so you know when you need to access medical care.
- Decide with your healthcare provider what will work best for you.
- Your healthcare provider may need advice from a specialist or may suggest you see another doctor (referral).
- Remember, there can be a lot of information to take in, ask questions and make sure you are voicing your wishes on how you want your care managed.



Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral (page 10)

- You may need a referral based on your specific needs.
- Ask who you are being sent to and what they do.
- Ask how long it will take to be seen and what you should do if you don't hear back.



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms (page 11)

- Take an active role in your treatment.
- Write down any new symptoms.



Keep taking care of yourself (page 12)

- Keep taking care of your overall health (remember whole-person health).
- Look at other resources or supports that may help you.



Whole-person health (page 2)

Important Tips:

Need a family doctor?

www.ahs.ca/findadoctor

Need health advice?

Call Health Link at 811

Need to find programs and services in your community?

Call 211 or visit ab.211.ca

Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the Medicine Wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical:** your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social:** your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual:** your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional:** how you think, feel, and cope with life events



Whole-person health

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

“What are the things in my life that are important to me?”

“What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?”



Continued on next page.

Bringing forward what matters to you is important. Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:



Physical

"My symptoms are making it hard for me to do my job."

"Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to move around, it's hard to take care of myself."

Financial and Social

"I'm worried I won't be able to get to all of my appointments."

"I need my daughter with me as a translator."

"I'm not sure how I will pay for my medications this month."

Spiritual

"It's important that I follow traditional healing practices."

"How can I include my cultures' foods and family recipes in my nutrition plan?"

"It's important that my religious practice of fasting is respected and brought into my care."

Emotional

"I'm lonely and have no one to talk to."

"I have a lot of stress and I'm not sure how to manage it."

"Ever since my friend died, I've been struggling with my feelings."

What is Lower Limb Ischemia?

Peripheral artery disease is a narrowing of your arteries and in severe cases, this can cause restriction or blockages in the blood vessels in your legs which we call lower limb ischemia. This often causes pain in your foot which usually is worse with activity and the pain can continue, even when at rest. It can also affect how your body is able to deal with infections which can lead to ulcers or wounds not healing.

Before your appointment

Here are a few tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- Use a symptom tracker to write down important information for you to share with your healthcare provider about your symptoms. A symptom tracker can help you remember what symptoms you're feeling, when it started, how often it happens, and what makes your symptoms better or worse.
- When you're done using the symptom tracker, review your list and put a mark beside the questions and concerns that are most important for you to share with your healthcare provider.
- Make a list of the prescription and non-prescription (over the counter) medicines you use, including any vitamins, lotions, herbs, and supplements.
- Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.



Helpful tools and resources

Use a symptom tracker

<https://hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf>

To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or record the conversation using your phone's voice recorder or the Alberta Health Services My Care Conversations app (www.ahs.ca/careapp).



Healthcare provider's assessment

Claudication Assessment:

- **Why do I need this assessment?:** Claudication is the medical term for muscle pain in your legs that is felt with activity.
- **What should I expect?:** Your health care provider will ask you questions about your pain level and what makes the pain worse, to better understand how severe your condition is.

Ankle Brachial Index (a non-invasive test that compares blood pressure in your arms to your legs):

- **Why do I need this assessment?:** This can provide a clear picture to your health care provider about the severity of your condition.
- **What should I expect?:** This may be done by your health care provider, or this may be done at a specialty clinic depending on where you live.

Ultrasound doppler:

- **Why do I need this assessment:** This non-invasive test can measure the amount of blood flowing through the blood vessels in your legs and feet.
- **What should I expect:** Depending on your location, you may need to travel to where this service is provided.

What should I watch for (symptoms of concern)?

- Be aware of: If pain worsens and doesn't get better with rest. Skin colour changes to your foot. Cool or pale skin. Persistent, slow healing wound.
- Contact your healthcare team ASAP for: Swelling, blistering and a wet appearance of the skin may be a serious infection and needs urgent medical attention.
- A worsening of the pain, particularly if this happens quickly, can be a sign that a restricted blood-vessel is now fully blocked. Symptoms range from pain, colour change in the skin, numbness and inability to move the limb.

What should I share with my healthcare provider?

- What impact the health condition or issue is having on things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships?
- What has worked for you in the past to manage your current condition?
- What types of things help you work better with your healthcare team? Additionally, what do you expect and need from the relationship with your healthcare provider?

Continued on next page.

What should I share with my healthcare provider?

There are lots of things in your life that can impact your ability to manage your health, like:

- Problems with money, housing, and access to transportation
- Alcohol or drug use
- Not enough support or help
- Childhood experiences

It's important to talk about these things with your healthcare provider because they all play a role in your health and well-being.

You are the most important part of your healthcare team.

If you don't understand what your healthcare team is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

"This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?"

"It sounded like you said that I should... Did I understand that correctly?"

"Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?"



Helpful tools and resources

- Making the most of your appointment: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888>
- Working with your healthcare team: <https://hqca.ca/for-patients-%20and-families/working-with-your-%20healthcare-team>



Get your tests

You will likely be asked to get bloodwork done by your health care provider. Blood tests, that look for things such as your cholesterol (lipid panel) and blood-sugar (HbA1C) levels will help your health care provider support you to manage some of the risk factors associated with your condition.

Your health care provider may check and compare your pulse in different parts of your body to better understand how well your blood is flowing to your legs. This is called an Ankle Brachial Index.

Your health care provider may also look at the colour of your foot when it is raised and after walking.

Your health care provider may also use an ultrasound to look at how the blood is flowing in your legs. This is called a doppler ultrasound.

Helpful tools and resources on next page.



Review your test results

It is important to know what your test results are and what they mean. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider. Medical terms can be hard to understand. And even common words like **positive** or **negative** might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

You might ask:

“What does this mean for me?”

“Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?”



Helpful tools and resources on next page.



Helpful tools and resources

See your results and health information using secure online tools:

MyHealth Records

See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Records account. Sign up at myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords

MyAHS Connect

See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to access your MyAHS Connect account. Learn more at www.ahs.ca/myahsconnect



Review your treatment & management options

Treating lower limb ischemia will vary depending on the severity of your condition. In many cases your primary health care provider can very effectively work with you to manage your health needs.

In some situations you may need to be referred to a vascular specialist if your condition worsens or needs more urgent attention which is why it is so important for you to understand your condition and how you can be successful in managing it.

Medical treatment options:

Symptoms with lower limb ischemia can change quickly. A key aspect to help you manage your condition is to making sure you recognize if new issues arise or if symptoms get worse. Your health care provider will go through the important things to watch for, including:

- A rapid change or increase in the pain you experience in your limb
- Changes in the colour of your foot (usually pale coloured)
- Your foot feeling consistently cold
- Marked reduction in your ability to feel or move your foot

Working with your health care provider to aggressively treat your other health issues can also help avoid further problems. These may include reviewing the medications that you are on to help control your cholesterol, blood pressure and blood-sugar levels.

Other treatment/ management options:

Important considerations for managing limb ischemia include:

- Stopping or reducing smoking (if applicable). This might include medication to help you quit
- Increasing the time you spend exercising at a moderate level for you - this can include supervised exercise programs
- Reviewing your diet to try and follow Canadian Dietary Guidelines <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/guidelines/#CDG-sections>

Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different treatment/ management options and decide which one(s) will work best for you:

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?”

“Can I use any of these options together?”

“How will this treatment make me feel? Will it have other effects (side effects)?”

“What results can I expect?”





Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

- You may be referred to a vascular surgeon, or other specialty clinics such as diabetic management clinics or foot care clinics.
- The role of this specialty is to provide specialist advice on how to manage your condition if symptoms worsen. A vascular surgeon would also be the one to perform surgery if necessary.
- Ask your health care provider about when you should be contacted by the specialist. If you are not contacted by that time, please follow up with your health care provider.

Your specialist will meet with you to discuss your health concerns and look at your test results. The specialist may diagnose your concern, order more tests, or discuss treatment/ management options with you.

You can find out more about the referral criteria for a specialist by asking your healthcare provider.



Helpful tools and resources

To learn about how to prepare for your specialist appointment, visit www.ahs.ca/quire



Start your treatment & watch your symptoms

As you try the treatment options you chose, remember that if something doesn't work the way you thought it would, think about other options and connect with your healthcare provider to find a treatment/ management that will work for you.

You should receive guidance on when to follow up, but it is particularly important that you contact your healthcare provider if symptoms worsen or if you notice new issues in your leg.

Contact your healthcare provider if you notice:

- Changes in leg or foot pain, especially if at rest
- Color changes of the skin on your legs
- Loss of movement or feeling to your leg and/or foot

Some symptoms need to be seen urgently and you should follow up right away if you experience:

- Sudden or significant changes in your leg/foot pain
- Color changes to your leg/foot (pale color or black/blue toes)
- Wounds that are not healing after two weeks

In some situations, it is better for you to go straight to the Emergency Department or call 911 for immediate care. This includes:

- Sudden loss of use of your leg/foot

Watching your symptoms is important. Call your healthcare provider or Health Link at 811 if you have any concerns. You might feel like you don't want to bother your healthcare team, but no detail is too small to share. If it matters to you, it will matter to your healthcare team.

You can clarify with your healthcare team what to expect in terms of follow-up communication. Call your healthcare team whenever you:

- Have questions
- Notice your symptoms getting worse
- Have problems with your medicine
- Haven't gotten test results or heard back about an appointment in the time you had agreed to



Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.



Making changes to your lifestyle and eating habits can be difficult, but your health care provider can tell you more about resources available to you for:

- Quitting smoking
- Healthy eating
- Safe exercise

Working with your health care provider will help you better understand the condition and allow you to make a plan together on how best to manage it.



Helpful tools and resources

Find resources and services in your community:

211 helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available anytime, day or night, by phone, text, and online chat. It is confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone. To contact 211:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Visit ab.211.ca

Workshops, classes, and services from the Alberta Healthy Living Program help you manage your condition: ahs.ca/ahlp

Chronic Disease Management support: ahs.ca/cdm

Health Information & Tools: myhealth.alberta.ca/Pages/HealthInfoToolsDefault.aspx

Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

- What is Peripheral Artery Disease - DynaMed - www.dynamed.com/condition/peripheral-artery-disease-pad-of-lower-extremities
- More information on Peripheral Artery Disease - MyHealth.Alberta <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=aa105361>

Get help now:

- Emergency: Call 911
- Health Link: Call 811

Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- [Addiction Helpline](http://www.addictionhelpline.ca): 1-866-332-2322
- [Mental Health Helpline](http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca): 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Crisis Services Canada: 1-833-456-4566, or talksuicide.ca

Community and social supports

- 211 Alberta: Call 211, Text INFO to 211, or visit ab.211.ca
- Family Violence Info Line: Call or text 310-1818, or visit alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports.aspx
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or alberta.ca/income-support.aspx

Alberta Health Services programs

- Home Care: ahs.ca/homecare
- Find a Dietitian: ahs.ca/nutrition
- Spiritual Care Services: ahs.ca/spiritualcare

Primary care (family doctors)

- Find a doctor: ahs.ca/findadoctor
- Virtual care guide: ahs.ca/virtualhealth

Patient concerns and feedback

- Office of Alberta Health Advocates: alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates.aspx
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or ahs.ca/patientfeedback

Helpful tip

If you don't have a computer and/or printer at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider if they can print a resource that you are interested in. You can also visit your local library.

Important phone numbers

This section is for patients and families to fill out.

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Notes

Use this space to take notes.

Background

About this Pathway

The AHS Provincial Pathways Unit co- developed this patient pathway in partnership with:

- Patient and Family Advisers.
- Primary Care Providers.
- Vascular Surgeons.

It is current as of **August 2023**.

Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by the Lower Limb Ischemia Clinical Patient Pathway Working group. Participant names available upon request.

Pathway Review Process

Primary care pathways undergo scheduled review every two years, or earlier if there is a clinically significant change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled review is January 2025. However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please email comments to

AlbertaPathways@ahs.ca.

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Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of health care professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified health care professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated health care providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice or professional competence.