

What is Vascular Surgery?

*by George Meier, MD
Chief, Vascular Division
University of Cincinnati*

Vascular Surgery developed as an outgrowth of Dr. Alexis Carrel's work on vascular suturing, for which he earned a Nobel Prize in 1912. It took nearly 40 years before these techniques were routinely applied to patient care in the early 1950s. Vascular surgery became more commonplace over the years, resulting in expansion of the specialty into the 1980s. At about this time, minimally invasive percutaneous vascular procedures began to replace the more invasive open surgeries.



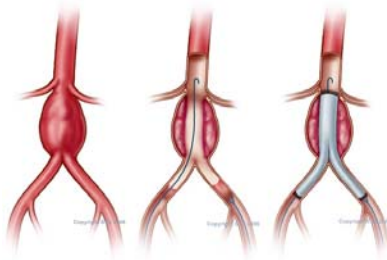
In 1986, Dr. Juan Parodi revolutionized the treatment of abdominal aortic aneurysms by treating these with a stent/graft combination.

This singular change resulted in a complete re-focusing of vascular surgery into minimally invasive endovascular treatments. The entire vascular surgery workforce was retrained in the early 1990s to include minimally invasive treatments as a routine part of vascular surgery. Now, in many centers, the dominant treatment used is endovascular with less invasive approaches the standard. Despite this shift, vascular surgeons are the only physicians currently that can provide comprehensive vascular care, from medical management, to endovascular interventions, to major open surgery as appropriate.

What area of the body is the vascular surgeon involved in treating? Essentially, any area of the vascular tree not requiring a heart-lung machine to treat is appropriate for referral to vascular surgeons. From preventing strokes by carotid intervention or surgery to saving the legs by endovascular or open lower extremity arterial revascularization, vascular surgeons remain the “primary care” physicians for most peripheral arterial, venous, and lymphatic diseases. Varicose veins? Vascular surgeons remain the

experts. Swollen leg? Again, vascular surgeons are trained to manage all aspects of peripheral vascular disease.

But what about aortic aneurysms and aortic dissections from high blood pressure? Often vascular surgeons are the physicians of choice in these areas as well, particularly as minimally invasive techniques replace conventional, open surgical procedures. For example, traumatic injury to the thoracic aorta is common in high speed motor vehicle accidents. Twenty years ago, a major chest operation with graft replacement of the aorta was the standard of care, performed by a cardiothoracic surgeon. Today, vascular surgeons are pioneering new techniques for internal relining of the injury, avoiding a major operation in most cases. Similarly, treatment of ruptured aortic aneurysms by vascular surgeons 5 years ago involved a massive operation with more than 50% of the patients dying.



Now, many institutions are treating most of these internally with endografts, with dramatic decreases in mortality the common result.

Vascular surgery - not just surgery anymore! Medical management has always been important to the specialty, but with the addition of minimally invasive endovascular treatments, vascular surgeons have the complete package for vascular disease management. The result is an innovative, patient-centric focus that provides comprehensive care tailored to the individual patient's needs. With innovative approaches using both open and endovascular techniques, vascular surgeons are there for our aging population with ever increasing vascular disease.

To learn more about your vascular health and find a vascular surgeon visit VascularWeb.org.