

# Atheroma

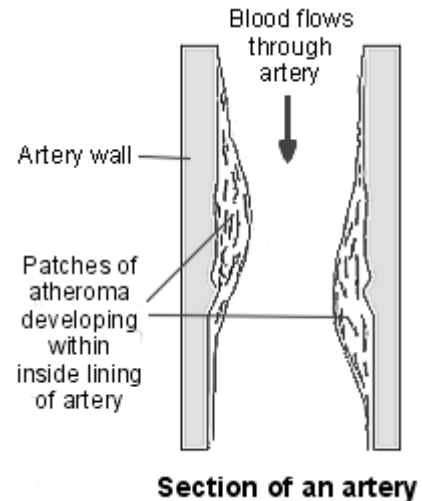
Atheroma is the root cause of various cardiovascular diseases such as angina, heart attack, stroke and peripheral vascular disease.

## What is atheroma (atherosclerosis)?

Patches of atheroma are like small fatty lumps that develop within the inside lining of arteries (blood vessels). Atheroma is also known as 'atherosclerosis' and 'hardening of the arteries'. Patches of atheroma are often called 'plaques' of atheroma.

Over months or years, patches of atheroma can become larger and thicker. So, in time, a patch of atheroma can make an artery narrower, which can restrict and reduce the blood flow through the artery.

Sometimes a patch of atheroma may develop a tiny crack or 'rupture' on the inside surface of the blood vessel. This may trigger a blood clot (thrombosis) to form over the atheroma which may completely block the blood flow.



## What are the diseases caused by atheroma?

Atheroma is the root cause of a number of cardiovascular diseases. That is, diseases of the heart or blood vessels. For example:

### Heart diseases

Angina (heart pains) is caused by a narrowing of the arteries that supply blood to the heart (the coronary arteries.) If a blood clot forms over a patch of atheroma in a coronary artery it can cause a heart attack (myocardial infarction.)

### Cerebrovascular disease - stroke and TIA

Cerebrovascular disease means a disease of the arteries in the brain (cerebrum). The problems this can cause include a stroke and a TIA (transient ischaemic attack). A stroke means that part of the brain is suddenly damaged. The common cause of a stroke is due to an artery in the brain which becomes blocked by a blood clot (thrombus). The blood clot usually forms over some atheroma. A TIA is a disorder caused by temporary lack of blood supply to a part of the brain.

### Peripheral vascular disease

Peripheral vascular disease is narrowing due to atheroma affecting arteries other than arteries in the heart or brain. The arteries that take blood to the legs are the most commonly affected.

If you can prevent a build up of atheroma in the arteries, you are less likely to develop the above diseases. If you already have one of the above diseases you may prevent or delay it from getting worse if you prevent further build-up of atheroma. Measures such as stopping smoking if you smoke, reducing a high blood cholesterol level, treating high blood pressure, eating a healthy diet, keeping your weight in check and doing some regular physical activity can help. For details of how to help prevent a build up of atheroma see the leaflet called '*Cardiovascular Disease Prevention*'.