

Causes of lower limb amputation: Why do people need an amputation?

There are a variety of reasons why people need an amputation. The decision to amputate is a difficult one for all the people involved: you, your family, and the medical staff looking after you.

Lower limb amputations make up about 90% of all amputations. They are most commonly caused by Peripheral Vascular Disease (i.e. diseased blood vessels) and/or Diabetes.

These diseases decrease the blood supply to the leg and quite often people experience wounds or ulcers that don't heal, infection and associated pain. All of these factors affect the function of the leg and make it difficult for people to walk and move around freely.

The incidence of amputation related to Peripheral Vascular Disease and Diabetes is more common in older people. It is also known that smoking cigarettes over a prolonged period of time damages the small vessels in the leg, thus increasing the risk of amputation.

The remaining amputations of the lower limbs are generally accidental, for example workplace or motor vehicle accidents, medical conditions such as cancer or because of life threatening diseases like Meningococcal Septicaemia. Sometimes the surgeons may attempt to salvage the leg or as much as possible of the leg when removing cancerous tumour or following trauma. It may take sometime before an amputation is finally decided upon.

In addition to the above so-called 'acquired amputations, there is also a group of people born with 'congenital' amputations or 'limb deficiency'. The needs of this group are quite different and management starts at a very early age.

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