

# Carotid and Vertebral Dissection

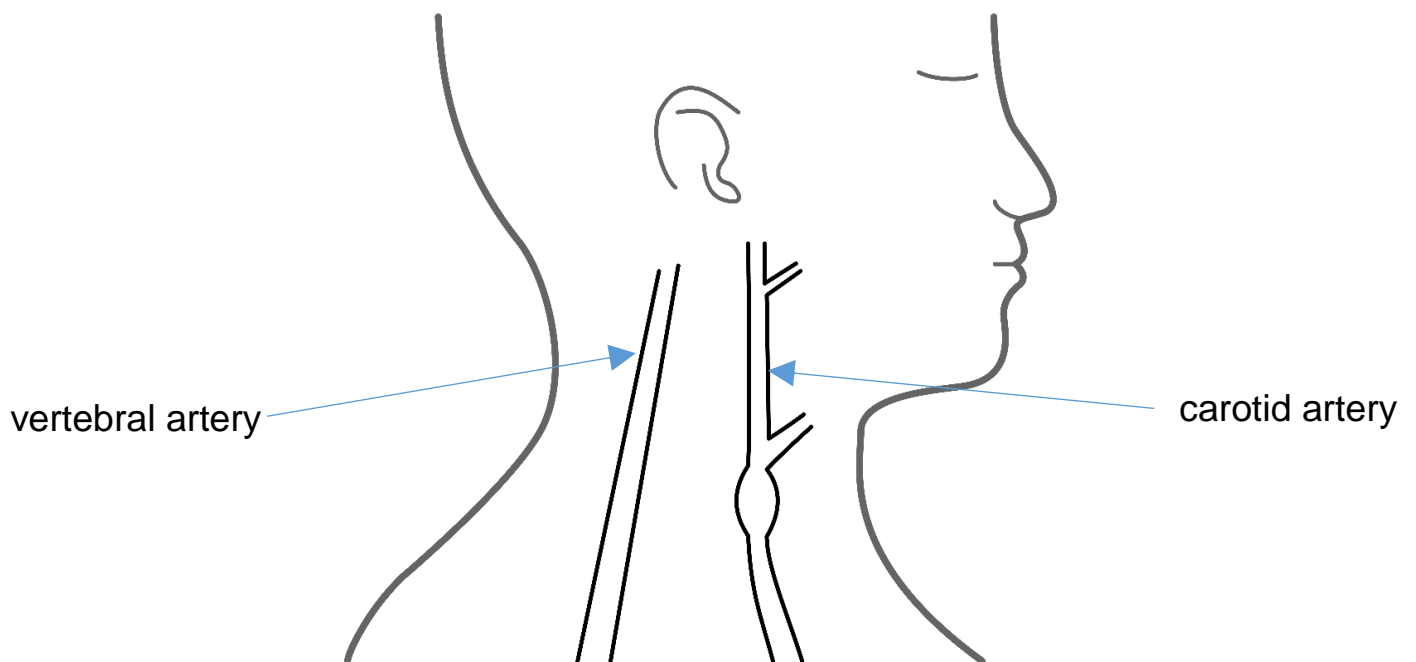
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## What is an artery?

An artery is a blood vessel, similar to a tube that delivers oxygen-rich blood to tissues and organs in the body.

## What are the carotid and vertebral arteries?

The carotid arteries run up either side of your throat and can be felt just below the jaw. The vertebral arteries run along either side of your neck bones. These arteries branch off into smaller arteries to supply blood to your face, brain and eyes.

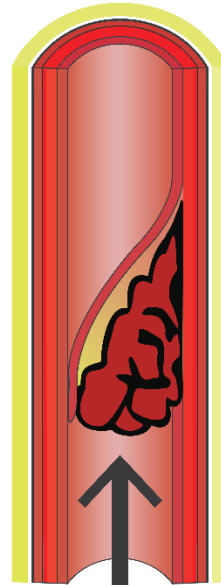


## What is a dissection?

A dissection is a tear in the inner layer of the artery wall. When this happens, blood can form a clot at the area of the injury. The clot can break loose, travel to the brain and cause a stroke.



A tear can also cause blood to build up between the layers of the artery wall causing a blockage of the artery.



In some cases, a tear in the artery at the base of the skull can cause the artery to rupture. This can result in bleeding onto the surface of the brain.

## What are the symptoms of a carotid or vertebral dissection?

A stroke can be the first sign of a carotid or vertebral dissection. Stroke symptoms occur **suddenly** and can include the following:

- Weakness of one side of the face and/or body
- Slurred speech
- Loss of vision or double vision
- Trouble with balance

If you experience any of these symptoms, **call 911 immediately**.

Other symptoms can result from injury to the artery and can develop suddenly or gradually over a period of hours or days. These may include:

- Neck pain
- New mismatched pupil size
- Drooping eyelid
- Pain in the face and/or jaw

## What causes a carotid or vertebral dissection?

Dissections are classified as spontaneous or traumatic.

- **Spontaneous** dissections may occur with little or no injury. In some people, this indicates that they may have a health condition that can weaken artery walls.
- **Traumatic** dissections are a result of a neck injury. For example, a neck fracture, neck manipulation/cracking, or motor vehicle accident.

## What are the risk factors?

Most people have no risk factors.

### **How is a carotid or vertebral dissection diagnosed?**

- Your doctor may order a computed tomography angiogram (CTA) or magnetic resonance angiogram (MRA). These tests take pictures of your blood vessels while you lay in a scanner and may require contrast dye to be injected into your vein.

### **How is a carotid or vertebral dissection treated?**

- In many cases the dissection will seal itself off or heal over time. Follow-up imaging is sometimes performed as needed to assess the healing progress.
- You may be prescribed a blood thinner such as aspirin. These medications lower the chance of developing blood clots. Your doctor will tell you if you have to take these medications lifelong or for a few months while the dissection heals.
- Keep your blood pressure in check. Your blood pressure should be less than 140/90, or less than 130/80 if you have diabetes.
- Stop using tobacco products. Talk to your healthcare provider for support and information on medications to help you quit.

### **What is the chance of having another dissection?**

- The risk of recurrence of a carotid or vertebral artery dissection is rare - approximately 1% per year.

### **Are there any restrictions after having a carotid or vertebral dissection?**

- Avoid any sudden twisting movements of the neck
- Avoid neck manipulation (neck cracking)
- Talk to your doctor about any other limitations

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