



Physician Focus for June - Massachusetts Medical Society

Q&A: Vein Disease of the Legs

By Allan I. Hoffman, M.D.

According to the Venous Disease Coalition, more than 25 percent of the U.S. population has some form of venous disease -- various conditions that impair blood vessels. The most common forms are varicose veins and spider veins; some 20 to 25 million Americans alone have varicose veins. Here's a primer on vein disease of the legs.

What are varicose veins?

Varicose veins are swollen, twisted, often-unsightly blue veins generally occurring in the legs, close to the surface of the skin. Because their valves are damaged, varicose veins hold more blood at higher pressure than normal veins, forcing fluid into the surrounding tissue causing swelling and often pain.

What causes varicose veins?

Venous reflux disease is the underlying cause of varicose veins. It occurs in leg veins, particularly the saphenous veins carrying blood back to the heart. To prevent blood from flowing in the wrong direction, these veins have numerous valves. When the valves fail, blood flows back down (refluxes) and pools up in the leg veins, causing them to swell.

What are spider veins?

Spider veins are small clusters of red, blue or purple veins that lay closer to the surface of the skin than varicose veins. They can look like tree branches or spider webs and most commonly appear on the thighs, calves and ankles. Spider veins cause no pain or discomfort and so are considered a cosmetic problem.

What are the symptoms of varicose veins?

Varicose veins may ache and itch, and legs can become tired, heavy and painful. The feet and ankles may swell because of poor blood flow. Left untreated, varicose veins can eventually rupture or cause leg ulcers.

Who's at risk for these conditions?

Half of us over 50 are at risk, with women more susceptible than men. Other risk factors include genetics, obesity, and pregnancy. People whose jobs require extended standing are particularly vulnerable.



What basic treatments are available?

Walking, wearing compression hose, elevating and resting the legs may relieve some of the symptoms (losing weight helps, too) and may prevent the condition from worsening. Should the veins continue to deteriorate, however, more aggressive procedures may be required.

What are the more advanced treatments?

Sclerotherapy is a more aggressive treatment that injects a solution into a leaking vein, causing it to close; it's most effective on spider veins. Ambulatory phlebectomy is a surgical procedure for treating surface veins. Small incisions are made along a varicose vein, and the vein is "fished out" of the leg using surgical hooks or forceps. The procedure is performed under local anesthesia in a doctor's office. Ablation procedure is a minimally invasive surgical treatment for venous reflux disease. Performed under local anesthesia, usually in a physician's office and with virtually no pain, the treatment uses laser or radiofrequency energy to close the saphenous vein. Once the diseased vein is closed, blood is re-routed to other healthy veins. The actual procedure takes about 20 minutes, but patients will spend two to three hours in all for normal pre- and post-operative procedures. Ablation provides rapid and mild patient recovery, and the post-operative regimen consists of walking and wearing compression hose on the treated area for a few days.

What potential risks and complications are associated with these procedures?

As with all venous procedures, risks are present. Complications, while rare, may include clotting, blocked blood vessels, infection, skin burns, or itching, among others. Patients should consult their physicians to determine the necessity for treatment and their risks of complications.

Are there steps I can take to keep my legs healthy?

Yes! From walking to keeping your weight down to the kinds of clothes you wear, there are many actions you can take to improve your leg health. For a free copy of Your Guide to Healthy Legs, visit www.veininstitute.org. For more information on venous disease, visit www.venousdiseasecoalition.org.

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