Understanding Varicose Veins

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What Are Varicose Veins?

If you have large, bulging, twisted or swollen veins that are visible just under your skin, you may have varicose veins. This is a common condition that affects 20% of all adults and about 50% of people over 50.

To understand what varicose veins are, it’s helpful to know how healthy veins work. When your heart pumps oxygen-rich blood, your arteries transport it throughout your body. After your tissues take the oxygen they need from your blood, your veins carry blood back to your heart.

Your veins contain one-way valves that help keep blood moving in the right direction, toward your heart. (Because much of the blood flowing back to your heart must travel up your legs against gravity, these valves do an important job.)

Usually, vein valves work well. But sometimes, if they become weak or damaged, they may allow your blood to leak back into your vein rather than moving to your heart. This is called venous reflux. When this happens, blood can pool in your vein, forcing the walls of the vein to enlarge and bulge.

Varicose veins may appear red, blue or the same color as your skin. They occur most often in your legs, especially your thighs, calves, ankles or feet. During pregnancy, they may appear in a woman’s buttocks, pelvic area or even in her genitals. Other types of varicose veins include hemorrhoids (which occur in the rectum and anus) and varicoceles (which occur in a man’s scrotum and may contribute to infertility).

Spider veins are similar to, but usually tinier than, varicose veins because they occur in smaller blood vessels. Spider veins appear as dark blue or red blotches or jagged red or blue lines on your skin. Although they tend not to bulge, cause pain or present health risks, they can be unsightly, especially when they appear in clumps or on your face.

Although you may think of varicose veins as only a cosmetic concern, serious cases may lead to health issues such as skin ulcers, bleeding sores, skin infections and a type of blood clot called superficial thrombophlebitis. When varicose veins cause serious symptoms and potential health risks, most health insurers cover treatment costs.

Who Develops Varicose Veins

Although anyone can develop varicose veins, they’re more likely to occur in women. Risk factors for varicose veins include:

- Age
- A family history of varicose veins
- A history of injuries, blood clots or trauma to your leg that may have damaged your vein valves
- Being overweight or obese, because excess weight adds pressure to your veins and valves
- Inactivity
- Pregnancy
- Hormonal birth control or menopausal hormone therapy, because estrogen relaxes veins and may weaken vein valves
Do You Have Varicose Veins?

Varicose veins may cause no signs or symptoms at all. Or they may cause pain, swelling, throbbing, heaviness, burning, cramping, itching, open sores, bleeding, discoloration of your skin or an itchy rash (dermatitis) on the skin near the vein. You may also feel heaviness or swelling elsewhere in the legs, ankles or feet.

Due to their telltale appearance, you probably realize if you have varicose veins. Your doctor can determine whether your varicose veins pose health risks. To learn more, your doctor may order a duplex ultrasound that uses sound waves to create images of your blood vessels on a computer screen and to determine if proper blood flow can be visualized.

Treatment Options

Self-care: If your varicose veins cause only minor discomfort, your doctor may recommend self-care measures, including:

- Avoiding crossing your legs while sitting, which can weaken or damage vein valves over time
- Avoiding standing or sitting for long periods of time
- Being physically active throughout the day, aiming to accumulate about 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise most days
- Breaking up periods of inactivity with brief walks every half hour or so
- Doing exercises that strengthen leg muscles
- Losing weight if you’re overweight or obese with changes in diet and exercise
- Propping up your legs above your heart so gravity can help move blood up from your feet and legs
- Wearing support-style pantyhose or compression hose, which put pressure on your legs and help prevent blood from pooling in your veins
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Noninvasive solutions: Although self-care strategies can relieve some of the discomfort of varicose veins, removing the veins offers the only permanent symptom relief. In the past, varicose veins required complex surgical removal. But now, there are several options that offer quick, virtually painless ways to eliminate varicose veins.

At VCU Health’s Baird Vascular Institute, our vascular surgeons and interventional radiologists use advanced technology and gentle, minimally invasive procedures to treat varicose veins and spider veins. These procedures deliver excellent results with far fewer side effects and much shorter recovery times than traditional surgery.

Endovenous thermal ablation (EVTA): Intended primarily for larger varicose veins, EVTA allows our vascular specialists to use ultrasound imaging to guide a small catheter into a vein through a tiny incision in the skin. The catheter delivers just enough laser or radio wave heat to cause the vein to close, collapse, seal shut and disappear within a few months.

Ambulatory phlebectomy: This procedure removes smaller varicose veins through tiny incisions in the skin using a specially designed set of tools. Often, the incisions are so small that they disappear completely after a few months.

Ultrasound-guided sclerotherapy: This procedure is a gentle and highly effective treatment for spider veins. Using ultrasound, vascular specialists guide a small needle into spider veins and inject a fluid that scars and closes them. Within a few weeks, treated veins fade away. While more than one treatment may sometimes be required to address the problem areas fully, sclerotherapy can be very effective at improving the appearance of your legs.

Surface laser therapy: Using an extremely accurate laser to deliver pulses of light energy, this treatment destroys spider veins on the surface of your skin. Blood from the treated veins redirects to other veins, and your body gradually absorbs the treated veins, leaving clearer skin.

Sources


Have questions? Call 804-828-2440 or visit www.vcuhealth.org