

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

The words “varicose veins” immediately paint the picture of unsightly, blue-green and sometimes, bulging lines that run along the thigh and leg.

Before we discuss this condition further, let us first establish the functions and importance of veins.

Veins are also the common vessels tapped when blood is drawn for investigation or when administering intravenous medication at the hospital.

In their blood-carrying function, veins are aided by muscle contractions and one-way valves to push blood back to the heart against gravity. When these valves malfunction or are weakened, they fail to prevent the back-flow of blood down the superficial veins. Blood then collects in the veins, and the vessel eventually dilates and becomes tortuous. Hence varicose veins, that appear as ugly looking and dilated lines in the lower limbs.

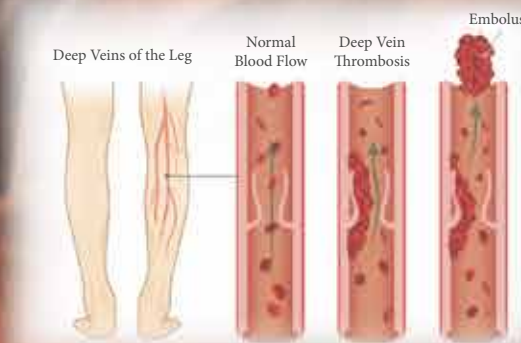
Someone who has varicose veins would most likely be able to identify them. Medically, confirmation of the diagnosis is also rather straightforward, as examining these veins would make the diagnosis very obvious.



Patients with varicose veins sometimes complain about heavy dragging pain or sensation in their feet or lower limbs, usually at the end of the day. This can be relieved by lying down or raising the legs to relieve the pressure from venous backflow.

Non-life-threatening, varicose veins are not just merely unsightly, though. They can lead to complications such as venous ulcers that appear on the inner aspect (part) of the lower leg and are associated with hyperpigmentation of the skin surrounding it.

Vein Matters



Varicose veins are generally uncomplicated and do not need any surgical intervention. However, some conservative measures may be helpful to relieve the symptoms. These include wearing graduated compression stockings, walking to relieve pressure from prolonged standing and occasionally lifting the legs.

Surgery is advised mainly for cosmetic purposes, or when long-standing venous ulcers are not improved by conservative measures.

Pregnant women often complain of varicose veins because increased blood volume causes higher pressure in the veins. As the pregnancy progresses and baby grows, extra weight also places more stress on the blood vessels and alters blood flow.

Those who stand for long hours, such as hawkers or salespeople who stand at a single spot for prolonged periods, are also predisposed to varicose veins. This condition may occasionally arise resulting from congenital weakness in persons suffering from connective tissue disorders.

They can also arise secondary to previous Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) episodes.

The Clotting Factor

DVT is very simply put, a blood clot in the deep veins within the lower limbs. This is caused by:

- Venous stasis - this may occur due to compression of the deep veins, e.g during a prolonged surgery, major hip or pelvic surgery.
- Hypercoagulability of blood - the increased tendency of the blood to clot, either inherited or acquired as a result of other conditions such as cancer, trauma, pregnancy or prolonged bed rest.
- Endothelial damage - an uncommon condition that may arise resulting from inflammation or injury.

Most DVT episodes are caused by venous stasis. Often a direct cause and effect situation, it is a condition that can generally affect anyone. As such, management usually starts with prevention.

If you are heading for pelvic or hip replacement surgery, or any other prolonged surgery, you will be assessed for DVT risks and your doctor will take the necessary preventative measures on a case by case basis.

Stretches of inactivity and immobility, such as sitting in a car or aeroplane for long periods, can also put you at risk for DVT. Compression stockings can be helpful in these situations, or you can just get up and walk about.

However, note that DVT is not to be taken lightly as it is potentially life-threatening. Such clots can lead to embolisms that can block the blood flow along the pulmonary artery to the lungs and result in death. Therefore, a DVT diagnosis would have to be confirmed by further investigations. Your doctor will also assess how far the problem extends up the lower limb. The higher it is, the higher the probability for surgical intervention.

On the average, DVT occurs in 1 in 1,000 people per year¹ with men being more susceptible. Obesity, smoking, advancing age and hypertension are also risk factors.

At the end of the day, the prescriptions of a healthy and active lifestyle and good weight management still come into play.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2020806/#>