

Self-Care for Varicose Veins and Vein Disease

Varicose veins are enlarged, unhealthy veins that are visible on the surface as raised, bulging and twisting veins. In many patients unhealthy veins that can cause pain, swelling, and other health problems are hidden under the skin surface.

Vein disease occurs when damaged or weakened valves cause blood to pool in the veins. Instead of flowing out of the veins toward the heart, blood leaks backward toward the foot and accumulates in the veins. Over time this process causes inflammation that leads to a variety of symptoms.

The following are home measures to care for your legs:

1. Wearing well-fitted graduated compression stockings during waking hours can improve blood flow and alleviate symptoms.
2. Elevate your legs as close to heart level as possible when you are able. This reduces the pooling of blood in unhealthy veins.
3. Avoid sitting or standing for long periods as much as possible. If you need to sit for long periods, get up and walk around periodically. While sitting or standing pump your foot up and down by alternating standing on your heel and standing on your toes. Walking and foot pumps activate the calf muscle to move blood out of your legs back to your heart.
4. Exercise regularly. Walking, biking, and swimming improve the blood flow in your legs.
5. Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight adds pressure to your veins which worsens unhealthy blood flow and pooling in the veins.
6. Even a minor injury to your leg can cause significant bruising and swelling. If you injure your leg to the extent that you suspect it will bruise, elevate your leg and put an ice pack over the area for 10-20 minutes at a time. Repeat every 1-2 hours as you are able for the next 24 hours while you are awake. Use a thin cloth between the ice pack and your skin.
7. A light scratch or bump can cause a significant amount of bleeding from a large or small vein near the skin surface. Elevate your leg as close to heart level as possible and hold firm pressure over the point of bleeding. Continue to hold constant pressure for a full 15 minutes without checking for bleeding. If bleeding persists, hold for another 15 minutes. If repeating this several times does not stop the bleeding, have a friend or family member take you to the emergency department or call 911.

Patients with vein disease are at increased risk for developing blood clots in unhealthy veins. This is called superficial venous thrombosis or SVT. These clots can occur in a varicose vein that you see on the surface or in an unhealthy vein under the surface of your skin. You may notice a firm, tender lump or cord under the skin. Sometimes the skin over the lump becomes red and warm. Call your primary care provider or vein specialist as soon as possible. The vast majority of these clots are not dangerous, but occasionally they can extend into deep veins which can be serious and even life-threatening.

A blood clot in a deep vein (deep venous thrombosis or DVT) is an unlikely but potentially life-threatening complication of vein disease. Seek urgent medical care for the following signs concerning for a deep blood clot:

- Pain in your calf.
- Generalized (overall) swelling in the leg, calf, ankle, and/or foot. Particularly when the swelling is more noticeable in one leg when compared to the other.

When should I consult with a vein specialist?

1. If the above home measures do not give you relief or you are not satisfied with how your legs feel.
2. If you develop bleeding from a leg vein.
3. If you develop a blood clot in an unhealthy vein (superficial venous thrombosis or SVT).
4. If you notice skin changes on your leg(s) such as a change in the color of the skin or an eczema-like rash.
5. If you develop a sore or wound on your leg that is slow to heal or will not heal.
6. If you notice a gradual increase in swelling of your leg(s).

When should I seek urgent medical care?

Seek urgent medical care or call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example:

- You faint/pass out (lose consciousness).
- You have difficulty breathing or feel like you cannot catch your breath.
- You have sudden chest pain, shortness of breath, or you cough up blood.
- Problems with your vision or balance.
- Pain that does not resolve with pain medication.
- A vein begins to bleed and you cannot stop it.
- Signs concerning for a deep blood clot (deep venous thrombosis or DVT):
 - Pain in your calf.
 - Generalized (overall) swelling in the leg, calf, ankle, and/or foot. Particularly when the swelling is more noticeable in one leg when compared to the other.

