Vein Health

Educational Guide

About varicose and spider veins

Varicose and spider veins affect many lives, not only physically, but also emotionally. Although men are affected, these conditions are far more common among women, affecting nearly 50% of adult women.

In order to understand what varicose and spider veins are, we need to understand some simple anatomy, and how the body works. Blood pulses through the arteries – powered by the beating of the heart – to provide nutrients and oxygen to the body tissues. It returns to the heart by means of the veins. The veins are also vessels in graduated sizes, but unlike the arteries, they have tiny valves on their inner walls to prevent the blood from flowing backward. In the legs, the blood must flow through the veins upwards against the force of gravity.

If the valves do not work properly, circulation is impaired and blood accumulates in the veins, stretching them. The result is varicose veins – abnormally enlarged, bulging, often bluish and lumpy-looking veins. These prominent veins are often accompanied by dull, nagging aches and pains. Swelling or edema (that causes the ankles, feet or legs to seem fatter or thicker), leg sores, itching, leg cramps, and a feeling of heaviness in the legs are characteristic of varicose veins. If you have a continuous condition involving increased pressure in the vein system of the leg, your circulation may be impaired to the point that the tissues suffer. The resulting tissue damage is called a chronic venous stasis ulcer where the skin becomes reddened and inflamed. (If this occurs you should seek medical care.)

Spider veins are an unsightly and sometimes uncomfortable enlargement of smaller veins (sometimes called broken capillaries) which are the smallest and closest to the skin surface, and appear in tangly clusters of red, blue or purple veins. Spider veins typically occur on the legs but can also be seen on the face and elsewhere on the body.

The cause of varicose and spider veins

Lack of circulation contributes to the formation of varicose and spider veins, so they are more common in people who sit or stand in one position for prolonged periods of time, people who habitually sit with their legs crossed, and those who lack proper regular exercise. Excess weight, heavy lifting, and pregnancy put increased pressure on the legs, increasing the likelihood of developing varicose and spider veins. Constipation, phlebitis, heart failure, and liver malfunction (a swollen, enlarged, or fatty liver slows down the return of blood to the heart) can also play a role in the formation of varicose and spider veins.

A deficiency of vitamin C and bioflavonoids (especially rutin and quercetin) can weaken the collagen structure in the vein walls, which can lead to varicose and spider veins. Vitamin E deficiency also has been linked to the development of varicose veins. Vitamin E helps prevent the formation of blood clots, helps dilate blood vessels, and helps dissolve or prevent the formation of fibrin, a material that makes the formation of blood clots possible. A tendency toward varicose and spider veins may also run in families.

Spider veins develop as a result of a weakening in the vein wall or because of increased pressure in the vein system. In addition, injuries, accidents (such as those causing heavy bruising), and surgery may all cause spider veins.

Common medical treatments

The traditional treatments for varicose veins include leg wraps and, if the problem worsens, surgery. A graduated pressure

stocking can improve the circulation as long as the stocking is worn. A pressure stocking is one which puts a lot of pressure on the skin at the level of the ankle, and less pressure higher up the leg. Traditional vein-stripping is done in the operating room and is costly. Spider veins don't pose a health hazard, so treatment is considered cosmetic, and insurance does not cover this procedure. For spider veins and small varicose veins, the most common treatment is sclerotherapy. Using a needle, a special solution is injected into the veins, causing them to close up or collapse. The patient may need to wear bandages or compression stockings for a time, and might experience swelling, bruising, itching, redness or soreness. Typically, 3-5 sessions are needed. Surgery is very expensive. Laser treatment can be more expensive and even more painful.

None of these treatments address the underlying cause(s) of the problem. They only treat the symptoms, so varicose and spider veins may return.

Lifestyle Tips for healthy veins

Here are some simple, yet important, things you can do to support healthy veins and reduce the risk of varicose and spider veins:

• Good nutrition is essential. Eat a diet that is low in fat and refined carbohydrates and includes plenty of fish, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and fresh vegetables and fruits. Make sure that your diet contains plenty of fiber to prevent constipation and keep the bowels clean. Varicose veins are rarely seen in parts of the world where high-fiber unrefined diets are consumed. Also drink ten glasses of

purified water per day.

• Maintain a healthy weight and get regular moderate exercise. Walking, swimming, and bicycling all promote good circulation. Change your daily routine to allow more time for exercise and movement for your legs. Simple exercises, which can be done even while sitting at a desk, can help prevent varicose veins. Flex the ankles up and down 10-15 times each, extend the knee horizontally and bring it back into a right-angle position 10-15 times each. Repeat the exercises as often as possible during the day. Dr. Charles Hufnagel, past chairman of the surgery department at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, Washington D.C., said that such exercises "prevent the pooling of the blood in the veins, and accelerate the return of the blood out of the veins."

• Avoid long periods of standing or sitting. Take rest periods several times during the day to elevate your legs above heart level. Avoid crossing your legs, doing heavy

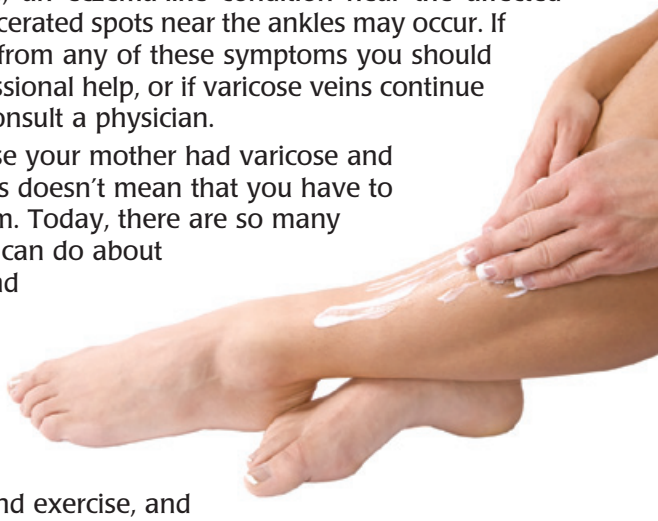
lifting, and putting any unnecessary pressure on your legs.

• Wear loose clothing that does not restrict blood flow. Wear supportive elastic stockings that promote the brisk movement of blood through the veins and strengthen the muscle tone of the calf.

• Avoid smoking

• A slant board is very good for varicose and spider veins. You can also elevate the foot of your bed slightly (3-4 inches).

In extreme cases, if varicose veins are not treated properly, complications such as bleeding under the skin, deep-vein blood clots, an eczema-like condition near the affected veins, or ulcerated spots near the ankles may occur. If you suffer from any of these symptoms you should seek professional help, or if varicose veins continue to occur, consult a physician.



Just because your mother had varicose and spider veins doesn't mean that you have to inherit them. Today, there are so many things you can do about varicose and spider veins. Healthy veins can be supported with diet and exercise, and even vein creams and herbal supplements. So don't suffer needlessly. You don't have to miss out anymore.

References

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