

# Venous Disease - Looking after your legs

SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 15

This fact sheet helps you understand venous disease (problems caused by poor blood flow) and what you can do to help yourself. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

Blood flows from the feet and legs towards the heart through veins. As the blood flow is going against gravity, blood can sometimes pool in the lower legs and feet. This pooling increases the pressure in the veins which can cause damage, resulting in venous disease.

The chances of getting this vein damage is increased by many things including:

- Age
- Pregnancy
- Being overweight
- Standing or sitting for long periods
- Smoking
- Air travel for longer than 3 hours can increase the risk of a blood clot in the leg (deep vein thrombosis or DVT)

## What can I expect to happen?

### Early on, you might notice:

- **Tired, aching legs** – sore and heavy as blood stretches the veins in the legs.
- **Spider veins** – tiny blood vessels which have become visible.
- **Swollen ankles** – puffiness from blood and fluid pooling in the legs, often caused by standing or sitting for long periods (the swelling in the ankle reduces once you have put your feet up)
- **Ankle flare** – blood vessels are enlarged by blood pooling in the feet

### Later on, you may develop:

- **Varicose veins** – Bulging veins caused by blood not returning to the heart efficiently leading to stretched vein walls and damaged valves.
- **Phlebitis** – Damage to vein walls or small clots can cause a vein under the skin to become red ('inflamed') and develop painful hard lumps but without any discharge. It should not prevent you from walking.
- **Leg problems in pregnancy** – Changes during pregnancy can cause the blood vessel walls to relax. This can cause discomfort, swelling and varicose veins.
- **A venous leg ulcer** – An open, often painful, sore in the skin that takes 2 or more weeks to heal. They develop on the inside of the leg, above the ankle. Ulcers require specialist medical treatment.
- **Skin changes** – Itchy, dark, hardened or leathery skin.

## Treatment for venous disease

### Compression hosiery

Compression hosiery helps to push blood back out of the legs but should always be prescribed by a nurse or doctor to make sure it is safe for you to wear.

If you are advised to wear compression hosiery, it is important that you wear it regularly, ideally every day.

## Where can I go for more information?

A member of your pharmacy team can help with assessing and managing your symptoms.

- [The British Association of Dermatologists \(BAD\)](#)
- [Legsmatter website](#)
- [Vascular Society for Great Britain and Ireland](#)

### Leg Ulcer support groups:

- [Leg Ulcer Forum](#)
- [The Lindsay Leg Club Foundation](#)

# What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

## Do:

- Regularly moisturise your legs
- Walk and exercise regularly
- Eat a balanced diet and watch your weight
- Put your feet up
- Check your legs and feet regularly
- Get treatment for any knocks and sores on the lower leg, particularly if you have diabetes
- Try to give up smoking

## Don't:

- Cross your legs for long periods
- Stand or sit for long periods without moving around
- Ignore any sores or irritations
- Assume that your legs will just get better by themselves
- Remain inactive for extended periods, eg long journeys. Even journeys of 3 hours can put you at risk of a blood clot in the leg. Wearing flight socks can help prevent them if you're at an increased risk. They are available through your pharmacy.

## When to seek help

**When to seek immediate help from your GP or NHS111 in England and Wales, the Phone First service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland.**

### If you have a bleeding varicose vein

Varicose veins near the surface of your skin can sometimes bleed if you cut or bump your leg. You should lie down, raise your leg and apply direct pressure to the bleeding point. Seek immediate medical advice if this does not stop the bleeding.

### If you think you might have infection and

- your symptoms are rapidly getting worse
- you have a weakened immune system – for example, because of chemotherapy or diabetes
- a young child or elderly person has possible cellulitis.

**Early treatment with antibiotics can stop the infection becoming more serious.**

### If you think you might have a deep vein thrombosis (DVT)

DVT is a blood clot in a vein, usually the leg. DVTs can be dangerous. Ask for an **urgent GP appointment or call 111** (in England and Wales, or the Phone First service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland) if you think you have a DVT.

### Symptoms of DVT in the leg are:

- throbbing or cramping pain in 1 leg (rarely both legs), usually in the calf or thigh
- swelling in 1 leg (rarely both legs)
- warm skin around the painful area
- red or darkened skin around the painful area
- swollen veins that are hard or sore when you touch them.

**Call 999 or go to A&E now if you have cellulitis or an infected leg ulcer with:**

- a very high temperature, or you feel hot and shivery
- a fast heartbeat or fast breathing
- purple patches on the skin
- feeling dizzy or faint
- confusion or disorientation
- cold, clammy, pale skin
- unresponsiveness or loss of consciousness.

**These are symptoms of sepsis, which can be very serious and potentially life threatening.**

### When to see your GP routinely

- **If you think you may have problems with your veins** Speak to a health professional who may review the circulation in your lower legs, to see if the veins in your legs are working well, and if you need further treatment.
- **If you have any concerns about the condition of your legs**, even if you do not have the same symptoms as described in this leaflet, it may be appropriate for your legs to be professionally assessed.
- **If you think you might have a leg ulcer.** If you have a break in the skin or a sore that takes longer than 2 weeks to heal, see your nurse or GP immediately for advice and next steps in managing your leg health.
- **If you think you have phlebitis** It is not usually serious and generally dies down in a few weeks but other conditions may have to be ruled out.
- **Leg problems during pregnancy** Contact your GP or midwife to see if compression stockings would be suitable to help reduce swelling.

### When to seek urgent help from your GP

#### If you think you might have an infection

Cellulitis is an infection that spreads through the skin. The skin is red, hot and painful (it may also be swollen and blistered). You can also have swollen, painful glands.

#### Infected leg ulcer

if you have been diagnosed with a venous leg ulcer and have symptoms that suggest it could be infected.

Symptoms of an infected leg ulcer can include:

- worsening pain
- a green or unpleasant discharge coming from the ulcer
- redness and swelling of the skin around the ulcer
- a high temperature (fever)
- an unpleasant smell coming from the ulcer