Venous Disease - Looking after your legs

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 15

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

Useful facts

Blood in your leg veins needs to travel upwards, against gravity, to get back to your heart. Your veins contain small one-way valves that open to let blood flow upwards and close to stop it flowing backwards.

Venous disease can develop when these valves become weak or damaged. This allows some blood to flow backwards and collect in the legs, which can lead to symptoms such as swollen or aching legs, varicose veins and changes to the skin.

The chances of getting venous disease is increased by many things including:

- Increasing Age
- Being overweight or obese
- Smoking
- History of a blood clot in the leg (deep vein thrombosis or DVT)
- Pregnancy
- Standing or sitting for long periods
- Family history of venous disease

What can I expect to happen?

Early symptoms:

- **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, 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** – a vein near the skin becomes inflamed (red, tender and painful) and may feel hard and lumpy, sometimes with a small clot.
- **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 takes2 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 stockings can help symptoms in some people by gently squeezing the veins, encouraging blood to flow back up to the heart and reducing swelling. A doctor or nurse will check if they are safe for you before recommending them.

If damaged or varicose veins are causing symptoms, a specialist may recommend treatment to close them. This can be done using **heat, for example with laser treatment, a special foam injected into the vein, or sometimes surgery.**

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

Leg Ulcer support groups:

- Leg Ulcer Forum
- The Lindsay Leg Club Foundation

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

Things that can help:

- Regularly moisturise your legs
- Walk and exercise regularly
- Eat a balanced diet and watch your weight
- Raise your legs above hip level when resting
- Check your legs and feet regularly
- Get treatment for any knocks and sores on the lower leg, particularly if you have diabetes
- Quit smoking

Things to avoid:

- Crossing your legs for long periods
- Standing or sitting for long periods without moving around
- Ignoring any sores or irritations
- Assuming that your legs will just get better by themselves
- Remaining inactive for extended periods, eg long journeys.

When to seek help

When to seek immediate help from your GP or NHS111in 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

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

If you think you might have a deep vein thrombosis (DVT)
A 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 one leg (rarely both legs), usually in the calf or thigh
- swelling in one 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 can review the circulation in your lower legs.
- **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.
- **If you think you have phlebitis** It is not usually serious and generally improves 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

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