MEDICAL MONDAYS | News Notes

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TOPIC: VARICOSE VEINS | Love Your Legs Again

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UNDERSTANDING VARICOSE VEINS

Varicose veins are gnarled, enlarged veins. The word *varicose* comes from the Latin root *varix*, which means "twisted." Any vein may become varicose, but the veins most commonly affected are those in your legs and feet. That's because you stand and walk upright, which increases the pressure in the veins in your lower body.

For many people, varicose veins and spider veins — a common, mild and medically insignificant variation of varicose veins — are simply a cosmetic concern. For other people, varicose veins can cause aching pain and discomfort. Sometimes the condition leads to more serious problems. Varicose veins may also signal a higher risk of other disorders of the circulatory system.

Varicose veins are a common condition in the United States, affecting up to 60 percent of all Americans. Women, especially older women, are more likely than men are to have this problem. Treatment may involve self-help measures, or procedures by your doctor to close or remove veins.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF VARICOSE VEINS

Signs and symptoms of varicose veins may include:

- An achy or heavy feeling in your legs, and burning, throbbing, muscle cramping and swelling in your lower legs. Prolonged sitting or standing tends to make your legs feel worse.
- Itching around one or more of your veins.
- Skin ulcers near your ankle, which represent a severe form of vascular disease and require immediate attention.

Varicose veins are dark purple or blue in color and may appear twisted and bulging — like cords. They commonly appear on the backs of the calves or on the inside of the legs. But, they can form anywhere on your legs, from your groin to your ankle.

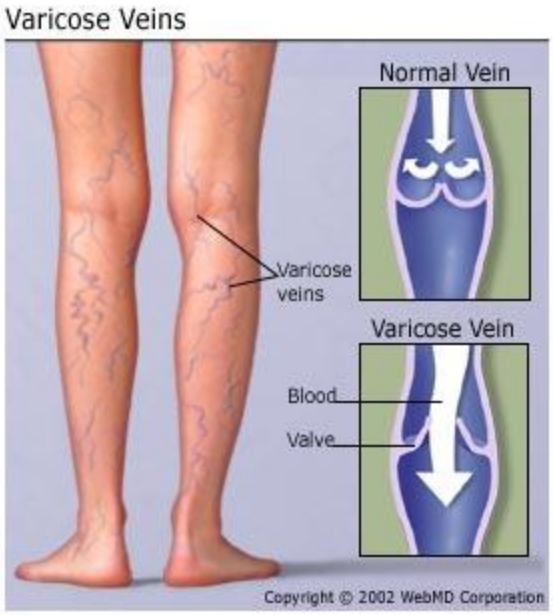
Spider veins are similar to varicose veins, but they're smaller. Spider veins are found closer to the skin's surface and are often red or blue. They occur on the legs, but can also be found on the face. Spider veins vary in size and often look like a spider's web or a tree branch.

Other types of varicose veins include:

- **Venous lakes.** These are pools of blood in the veins, often found on the face and neck.
- **Reticular veins.** These flat, blue veins under the skin often appear behind the knee.
- **Telangiectases.** These are fine clusters of blood vessels similar to spider veins, reddish in color and often found on the face or upper body.

Occasionally, veins deep within the legs become enlarged. In such cases, the affected leg may swell considerably. Any sudden leg swelling that may or may not be accompanied by pain and redness warrants urgent medical attention, as it may indicate a blood clot — a condition known medically as thrombophlebitis.

CAUSES OF VARICOSE VEINS



Arteries carry blood from your heart to the rest of your tissues. Veins return blood from the rest of your body to your heart, so the blood can be recirculated. To return blood to your heart, the veins in your legs must work against gravity. Muscle contractions in your lower legs act as pumps, while toned, elastic vein walls help blood return to your heart. Tiny one-way valves in your veins open as blood flows toward your heart then close to stop blood from flowing backward.

Varicose veins occur when the valves in your veins malfunction. As you get older your veins can lose elasticity, causing them to stretch. When this happens, blood that should be moving toward your heart may flow backward. Blood pools in your veins, and your veins enlarge and become varicose. The veins appear blue because they contain deoxygenated blood, which is in the process of being recirculated.

Some pregnant women develop varicose veins. Pregnancy increases the volume of blood in your body, but decreases the flow of blood from your legs to your pelvis. This circulatory change is designed to support the growing fetus, but it can produce an unfortunate side effect — enlarged veins in your legs. Varicose veins may surface for the first time or may worsen during late pregnancy, when your uterus exerts greater pressure on the veins in your legs.

RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING VARICOSE VEINS

These factors increase your risk of developing varicose veins:

- **Age.** Aging causes wear and tear on the valves in your veins that help regulate blood flow. Eventually, that wear causes the valves to malfunction.
- **Sex.** Women are more likely than men are to develop
- the condition. Hormonal changes during pregnancy, premenstruation or menopause may be a factor. Female hormones tend to relax vein walls. Taking hormone replacement therapy or birth control pills may increase your risk of varicose veins.
- **Genetics.** If other family members had varicose veins, there's a greater chance you will too.
- **Obesity.** Being overweight puts added pressure on your veins.
- **Standing for long periods of time.** Your blood doesn't flow as well if you're in the same position for long periods.

UNDERSTANDING SPIDER VEINS

Small "spider veins" also can appear on the skin's surface. These may look like short, fine lines, "starburst" clusters, or a web-like maze. Spider veins are most common in the thighs, calves, ankles, and feet. They may also appear on the face.

Spider veins can occur in men or women of any age, but most frequently affect women of childbearing years and older. Family history can also increase the tendency to develop varicose and spider veins.

PREVENTING VARICOSE VEINS

- Exercise regularly! Staying fit is the best way to keep your leg muscles toned, your blood flowing, and your weight under control.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing.
- If your daily routine requires you to be on your feet constantly, consider wearing daily support hose. Stretch and exercise your legs as often as possible to increase circulation and reduce pressure buildup.
- If you smoke, quit. Studies show that smoking may contribute to the development of varicose veins.
- If you're pregnant, be sure to sleep on the left side rather than on your back to minimize pressure from the uterus on the veins in your pelvic area. This position will also improve blood flow to the fetus. If you are prone to developing varicose veins, ask your doctor for a prescription for compression stockings.

TREATING VARICOSE VEINS

A mild case of varicose veins does not usually require a doctor's care. You can find relief from the discomfort of varicose veins with basic at-home treatment and various alternative remedies.

Superficial varicose veins normally do not require medical attention, but they should not be ignored. To relieve the discomfort, your doctor may recommend the following:

Elastic support stockings, which you can buy in most pharmacies and medical supply stores. Support stockings help your leg muscles push blood upward by concentrating pressure near the ankles. Put them on before you get out of bed in the morning. Raise your legs in the air and pull the stockings on evenly; they should not feel tight in the calf or groin. You should wear them all day and also elevate your legs for 10-15 minutes several times throughout the day.

Over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drug such as aspirin or ibuprofen to alleviate occasional swelling and pain.

If you notice skin around a varicose vein becoming ulcerated or discolored, or if you have continuing pain with no obvious outward signs, contact a doctor at once about the possibility of deep vein involvement.

Most varicose veins do not need to be removed. If particularly bothersome, **varicose veins can be eliminated by one of several methods:**

- Laser treatment
- Catheter-assisted methods that use heat or radiofrequency waves to destroy and ultimately close the vein
- Sclerotherapy, in which a chemical is injected into the vein to collapse its walls so it can no longer transport blood.

Unfortunately, no treatment can prevent new veins from becoming varicose. Before pursuing a particular treatment, discuss all options with a vascular surgeon.