

Walking around with bulging veins or short, jagged lines branching along your legs? If so, you might be dealing with more than unsightly veins.

By Charlotte Tallman

The Vein

before & after

About 55 percent of women and 45 percent of men in the U.S. suffer from some type of vein problem like varicose and spider veins, and leaving vein problems untreated can cause unnecessary discomfort and, in some cases, severe health problems. Most varicose and spider veins appear in the legs due to the pressure of body weight, force of gravity and task of carrying blood from the bottom of the body up to the heart. Compared with other veins in the body, leg veins have the toughest job of carrying blood back to the heart because they endure the most pressure and gravity effects.

There are certain factors that increase the risk of varicose and spider veins, including increasing age, family history, hormonal changes, pregnancy, obesity and lack of exercise.

Varicose veins can be blue, red or flesh-colored and often look like twisting and bulging cords, in some cases swollen and raised above the surface of the skin. Varicose veins are often found on the thighs, backs of the calves or the inside of the leg. Spider veins are like varicose veins but smaller. The red or blue jagged, short lines branch out close to the surface of the skin, often looking like spider webs.

Varicose veins can be caused by weak or damaged valves in the veins, allowing blood to flow backwards as it is supposed to move up the leg. When the blood leaks back into the vein, it pools and the backed-up blood makes the veins bigger, becoming varicose. Spider veins can be caused by the backup of blood, but they are often caused by hormone changes, exposure to the sun and injuries.

The common symptoms of varicose veins in the legs include aching pain that may get worse after sitting or standing for a long time or throbbing and cramping. Feeling heaviness in the legs is also common. Other symptoms include swelling, a rash that is itchy or irritated, darkening of the skin and restless legs. Spider veins can cause uncomfortable feelings in the legs or itching and burning.

"A lot of people with vein problems have a hard time sleeping or they can't remain on their feet for long," says Oscar Guzman, general manager for El Paso Varicose Veins Laser Clinic. "People should ask themselves if their legs hurt or feel heavy at the end of the day. If they answer yes, or if they awaken at night because of pain, they should seek treatment."

If varicose veins are left untreated, they can lead to more serious health problems like sores or skin ulcers due to chronic backing up of blood. Sores and ulcers are often painful and difficult to heal. Varicose veins can also lead to excessive bleeding when injured due to the thin skin over the vein. Superficial thrombophlebitis, or a blood clot that forms in a vein just below the skin, is also a known complication.

Symptoms of varicose veins warrant a visit to the doctor where they can be treated. Varicose veins are often treated with lifestyle changes and medical treatments including sclerotherapy, the most common treatment for both spider veins and varicose veins. During the treatment the doctor uses a needle to inject a liquid chemical into the vein, causing the vein walls to swell, stick together and seal shut. Ultrasound-guided sclerotherapy uses ultrasound imaging to guide the needle and can be useful in treating veins that cannot be seen on the skin's surface.

Endovenous techniques treat the varicose veins of the legs. During treatment a small tube is inserted into the vein and a small probe heats up the inside of the vein and closes it off. Healthy veins around the closed vein take over the normal flow of blood.

"Today's treatments are much better than they have been in the past," Oscar says. "People are able to come in and receive treatment with no downtime and minimal pain. They can leave and resume normal activities almost immediately."

Not all varicose and spider veins can be prevented, but there are steps that reduce chances of getting varicose and spider veins, or help ease the discomfort of ones you might have. These steps include regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, elevating legs as much as possible, taking a break from standing or sitting for long periods of time, wearing elastic support stockings, avoiding tight clothes that constricts the waist, groin or legs and avoiding high heels for long periods of time. //

resources

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