

Patient information from BMJ

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Varicose veins: what are they?

Many people have varicose veins. They don't usually cause serious problems but you may find them uncomfortable or feel unhappy about the way they look.

What are varicose veins?

Varicose veins are veins that have swollen because blood isn't flowing through them properly.

Your heart pumps blood all around your body through blood vessels called arteries, which carry oxygen to the cells in your various organs. When the cells have taken out the oxygen the blood returns to your heart through blood vessels called veins.

Blood returning from your feet and legs has to flow upward, so veins have valves in them to stop the blood flowing backward.

You get varicose veins when the valves in some of the veins near the surface of your legs don't work properly. When this happens blood collects in the veins in your legs instead of flowing back to your heart.

Varicose veins often appear on the backs of calves or on the insides of legs.

Varicose veins don't stop the blood in your legs getting back to your heart. There are many veins in your legs, so if one doesn't work properly, others can bring the blood back.

You may be more likely to get varicose veins if you're pregnant or if you are overweight.

What are the symptoms?

Varicose veins look like twisted cords running along your leg. They may bulge out from the surface of the skin. They often look and feel lumpy.

You may not have any problems with your varicose veins apart from that you can see them. But some people say their legs feel uncomfortable. This might make your legs:

- ache or throb
- feel heavy, or
- feel itchy.

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Hot weather and standing for long periods can make your veins look and feel worse.

If you are concerned about your varicose veins you may want to see your doctor. He or she will examine you and ask you some questions.

You might need some tests to check that your varicose veins are not a sign of a more serious problem with your blood vessels. But serious problems are not common.

What will happen to me?

Without treatment varicose veins tend to get worse over the years. This usually happens very slowly. You may also get more varicose veins in your legs over time.

Varicose veins do not usually disappear on their own. But if you get varicose veins while you are pregnant they may disappear after you have your baby.

Older people sometimes find that they get other problems linked to their varicose veins. These include thin, dry, itchy skin over the veins.

Bumping a vein can be painful and can lead to bleeding. And small blood clots can build up in varicose veins. This can cause pain and swelling. You should see your doctor if this happens.

The skin near varicose veins can sometimes get broken. This is called an ulcer and needs treatment.

Some people worry that they will get deep vein thrombosis (DVT) because of their varicose veins. This is when a large blood clot develops in your deep veins, which can be dangerous. But there is no good evidence that having varicose veins leads to DVT.

To learn about treatments for varicose veins, see the leaflet *Varicose veins: what treatments work?*

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