

Varicose Veins

They are swollen, they are unsightly, and they are sometimes painful. Affecting approximately 19% of men and 36% of women in the United States, varicose veins are uncomfortable and an annoyance to anyone who has them.



Causes

Varicose veins are caused by damaged valves within the veins. Valves exist to prevent backward flow of blood as it travels towards the heart. When these valves are not working properly, the blood flow will actually reverse and flow down, instead of up. The result is pooling of the blood within a vein, causing it to enlarge.

Varicose veins are most common in the veins of the legs and ankles. Many factors can aggravate this condition, including:

- Pregnancy
- Prolonged standing
- Obesity or distended belly
- Straining (constipation, coughing, etc.)
- Prior surgery or trauma to the leg
- Age
- Genetic predisposition

Symptoms

You will know if you have varicose veins if:

- Your veins protrude or bulge from under the skin and feel ropey
- Your legs often ache and feel heavy or itchy
- Your symptoms intensify after a long day of standing on your feet
- You have severe pain upon standing or cramps in your legs at night

Some people will not experience any symptoms at all. For most, varicose veins are simply a cosmetic problem.

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Treatment

The treatment for varicose veins is usually conservative. You may be asked to:

- Avoid excess standing
- Elevate the legs as much as possible (above heart level if you can)
- Wear compression stockings
- Avoid alcohol, which can cause the veins in the legs to dilate
- Walk for exercise

Your doctor may recommend other medical therapies, such as:

- Sclerotherapy, which involves injecting a chemical inside the vein that will obliterate it and cause it to scar
- Lasers, usually in the treatment for smaller veins
- Surgery

Complications

Occasionally, varicose veins may be more than just an eyesore. In some cases they can cause ulcers (large sores in the skin), as well as form painful blood clots.

Call your healthcare provider if:

- Your varicose veins are painful
- They get worse or do not improve with self-treatment, such as elevating your legs or avoiding excess standing
- Complications occur, such as swelling, fever, redness of the leg or leg ulcers

Prevention

Avoid prolonged standing if your personal or family history indicates you are at risk for developing varicose veins.

Sources: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002099/>

http://www.emedicinehealth.com/varicose_veins/page2_em.htm