



## HEALTH INFORMATION

# Varicose veins

Varicose veins are swollen and enlarged veins, usually blue or dark purple in colour. They may also be lumpy, bulging or twisted in appearance. They mostly occur in the legs. Other symptoms include:

- Aching, heavy and uncomfortable legs
- Swollen feet and ankles
- Muscle cramp in your legs

Your GP can diagnose varicose veins based on these symptoms, although further tests may be carried out.

## Why do varicose veins happen?

Varicose veins develop when the small valves inside the veins stop working properly. In a healthy vein, blood flows smoothly to the heart. The blood is prevented from flowing backwards by a series of tiny valves that open and close to let blood through. If the valves weaken or are damaged, the blood can flow backwards and can collect in the vein, eventually causing it to be swollen and enlarged (varicose).

Certain things can increase your chances of developing varicose veins, such as:

- Pregnancy
- Being overweight
- Old age

## Who is affected?

Varicose veins are a common condition, affecting up to three in 10 adults. Women tend to be more affected than men.

Any vein in the body can become varicose, but they most commonly develop in the legs and feet, particularly in the calves. This is because standing and walking puts extra pressure on the veins in the lower body.

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## Treating varicose veins

For most people, varicose veins do not present a serious health problem. They may have an unpleasant appearance, but should not affect circulation or cause long-term health problems. Most varicose veins do not require any treatment.

If your varicose veins are causing you pain or discomfort or they cause complications, they can be treated in several ways, the most common being:

- Endothermal ablation - treatment where heat is used to seal affected veins
- Sclerotherapy, which uses special foam to close the veins
- A phlebectomy, involving surgery to remove the affected veins
- Compression stockings - specially designed to improve circulation in the legs

It is unlikely you'll receive treatment on the NHS for cosmetic reasons, you will have to pay for this privately.

If you do require treatment it might help you to print treatment options for varicose veins to discuss with your GP.

## Preventing varicose veins

There is little evidence to suggest you can stop varicose veins getting worse, or completely prevent new ones developing.

However, there are ways to ease symptoms of existing varicose veins, such as:

- Avoid standing or sitting still for long periods, trying to move around every 30 minutes.
- Take regular breaks throughout the day, raising the legs on pillows while resting to ease discomfort.
- Exercising regularly, this can improve circulation and help maintain a healthy weight.



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