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Patient Information Sheet

Varicose Veins

What are varicose veins?

Varicose veins are veins under the skin of the legs that have become swollen and enlarged with a lumpy, bulging appearance. They are common and in the majority of people do not cause medical problems.

There are two main systems of veins in the legs:

- Deep veins: These are the veins that you cannot see. The calf muscles squeeze the deep veins during walking and these are the veins that tend to carry most of the blood back up the legs to the heart.
- Superficial veins: These occur under the skin, tend to be less important but are prone to forming varicose veins.

Both deep and superficial veins contain one-way valves, and it is these valves that ensure that the blood flows towards the heart. If these valves fail then blood can flow backwards down the veins, which results in an overload of pressure when standing which causes a widening of the veins and the formation of varicose veins. Raised pressure in these veins also encourages the development of spider veins and discoloured areas, which look like bruises.

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What causes varicose veins

Varicose veins are common and can affect up to 30% of the adult population. Women are more likely to suffer from varicose veins with hormonal factors including puberty, pregnancy, menopause, the use of birth control pills, and HRT can all affect the disease. Other predisposing factors include ageing, standing for long periods of time, obesity and leg injury.

Specifically with regard to pregnancy, varicose veins due to pregnancy often improve within 3 months after delivery but with increasing numbers of pregnancies, the abnormal veins less likely to resolve.

How do we investigate varicose veins?

The most common cause of varicose veins is due to the valves leak originating from either the groin or behind the knee. Where the leak originates from will determine the best way to treat the veins and as such, it is important to accurately locate the site of the valve leaks. At the out patient appointment this will be assessed using an ultrasound machine, which allows for a detailed examination of your veins.

Treating varicose veins

In the vast majority of patients, the varicose veins will not cause any major health problems. They can cause some discomfort and in a small proportion of patients lead to discolouration of the skin around the ankle area which can progress onto forming an ulcer.

If your varicose veins cause 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 usually this is with a technique called radiofrequency ablation
- Sclerotherapy – this uses special foam to close the veins
- Open surgery or stripping of the veins– this involves surgery to remove the affected veins