

Varicose Veins

Varicose veins are swollen, irregular shaped veins that often develop in the legs, particularly on the calves. They occur when the vein wall weakens, causing the vein to enlarge and appear bulging or lumpy just under the surface of the skin. If this happens, valves in the veins that prevent blood flowing in the wrong direction (back down your legs) may stop working properly and affect circulation. It usually happens to veins close to the surface of the skin; those deep inside the legs are unlikely to be affected. Varicose veins may also form elsewhere in the body – hemorrhoids are varicose veins around the anus.

Varicose veins, in the legs, affect about 30% of adults at some point in their life. They tend to be more common in older women. Varicose veins usually develop gradually, and may run in families. Although varicose veins can appear unsightly, and are sometimes painful, they do not usually cause any serious health problems.

It is not fully understood what causes the walls of your veins to weaken, and in many cases varicose veins occur for no apparent reason. However, there are a number of factors that increase your chances of developing varicose veins. These include:

- being overweight;
- genetics - varicose veins tend to run in families;
- pregnancy;
- age – the older you are, the more likely you are to develop varicose veins, and
- blood conditions – people who have conditions that affect the blood flow, such as diabetes, are more prone to varicose veins.

Varicose veins are not usually treated unless they are painful, and affect your daily activities, or your sleep. Support stockings and regularly elevating your legs are two of the more straightforward treatments to help relieve symptoms – check with your doctor or pharmacist if stockings would be safe for you to use.

It is unlikely that your diet can do much for veins that are already varicosed. But your lifestyle and what you eat and drink can help to prevent further occurrences.

Bioflavanoids in vitamin C-rich fruits and vegetables, act to strengthen the collagen structure in the vein wall. Include more of the following in your daily diet:

- Red, green and yellow peppers;
- Blackcurrants;
- Spring greens and kale;
- Strawberries;
- Kiwi fruit.

Keep your heart and circulation in tip-top condition:

- High fibre – choose more wholegrain foods like brown pasta and rice, oats, fruits and vegetables, pulses and lentils.
- Reduce salt intake – processed foods from ready meals to biscuits can be high in salt. Check the label 'a lot' is more than 1.25g, 'a little' is less than 0.25g.
- Essential fats – have 1 or 2 portions of oily fish like sardines, salmon and mackerel per week.

Other ways to help prevent varicose veins

- Keep moving – avoid sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Don't cross your legs when sitting down.
- Elevate your legs if you have been standing for a long period of time.
- Take regular aerobic activity to help with weight management and improve circulation.