

Can ugly varicose veins really cause open sores on my legs?

Veins are blood vessels that return blood to the heart and lungs so it can be re-oxygenated. This means that blood in the veins should move up out of the legs towards the heart. Bulgy varicose veins are an indication that there is blood flowing backwards down some veins instead of up towards the heart. This backwards flow of blood is called venous reflux or venous insufficiency. Over time, venous insufficiency leads to the pooling of blood in veins. This causes fluid to accumulate in the legs and excess pressure to develop in the veins causing them to stretch and dilate.

Fluid accumulation in the legs makes it difficult for the cells in that area to obtain the necessary nutrients or effectively remove the waste products. Gradually the skin in the legs becomes malnourished and fragile. Left untreated, open sores may ultimately develop. Open sores that develop as a result of venous reflux are referred to as venous stasis ulcers. Although not everyone who develops varicose veins will develop a venous stasis ulcer, varicose veins are an indication of a venous insufficiency disorder which increases the risk of developing venous stasis ulcers.

Venous stasis ulcers are the most common type of ulcers on the lower legs affecting 500,000 to 600,000 Americans annually. These ulcers are typically located below the knee in the ankle area. Some venous ulcers are quite painful while others are virtually painless. The borders of the ulcer are generally irregularly shaped and often surrounded by discolored and swollen skin. Fluid drainage from the ulcer is also common and may or may not indicate infection.

Treatment of venous stasis ulcers is twofold: reducing the amount of swelling and fluid accumulation in the legs and treating the underlying venous insufficiency disorder. Prescription strength compression stockings, leg elevation, and activities such as walking can all reduce the amount of fluid accumulation in the legs and help heal the venous stasis ulcer. Treatment of the underlying venous disease will prevent the venous stasis ulcer from returning once it is healed.

Venous stasis ulcers may be prevented by treating venous insufficiency before an ulcer develops. Symptoms of venous insufficiency include aching, throbbing, or burning of the legs especially with prolonged standing or sitting. Swelling of the legs or feet that worsen throughout the day, skin discoloration of the lower legs, or the development of varicose veins are also symptoms of venous insufficiency.

Venous insufficiency is a treatable condition. Effective treatment of this condition starts with a thorough evaluation by a healthcare professional experienced in the diagnosis and treatment of venous disorders. Once a detailed understanding of the venous disease is obtained, an effective treatment plan may then be developed.

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