

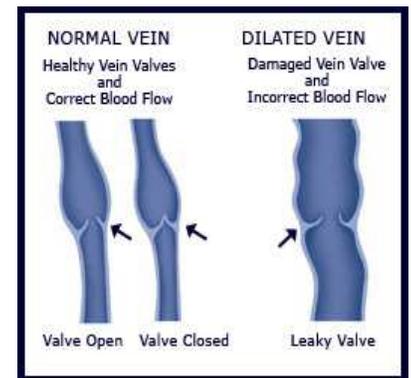
Varicose Veins: Treatment Myths Dispelled

If you are one of the approximately 80 million Americans suffering from varicose veins and related vein disorders, I have good news for you. The past 10 years have seen revolutionary advances in the treatment varicose veins. It is no longer necessary to endure painful vein stripping and vein removal procedures done in the hospital, which required prolonged recovery times. New state of the art vein treatments are relatively painless, can be done in the office setting, involve minimal or no down time, and allow almost immediate return to work and activities.

As with many new medical advances, the awareness and understanding of these treatment options lags behind the technology. In an effort to help “bridge the gap” of understanding, I have addressed some of the most common misperceptions I encounter regarding vein disease and vein treatments. T which first requires a basic explanation of veins and how they work.

How do veins work? What are varicose veins?

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 and out of the legs towards the heart. There are a series of one-way check valves in the veins which prevent the backward flow of blood towards the feet. When the one way valves fail or leak, gravity causes blood to flow backwards towards the feet and pool inside the veins. This backward flow of blood is called venous reflux or venous insufficiency. Over time, the pooling blood leads to excess pressure in the veins causing them to stretch and dilate.



While varicose veins are unsightly, they are also an indication of a more significant venous insufficiency disorder affecting veins below the skin that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Visible signs of venous insufficiency include swollen legs or ankles (especially with prolonged standing or sitting), large bulgy varicose veins, clusters of small red or purple starburst appearing veins (spider veins), color and texture changes of the skin on the legs, and open sores in severe cases. Leg pain, aching, tired or weak legs (especially

after long periods of standing or sitting), restless legs, leg cramps, and burning or itching of the skin are all symptoms that may reflect venous disease.

The cause of venous insufficiency is not yet fully understood. However, heredity plays an important part of this disorder. If one parent had venous disease, the chance of developing it is almost 50%. If both parents have venous disease, there is almost a 90% chance of developing the disorder. Other factors that play a role in the development of venous insufficiency include excessive body weight, prolonged standing or sitting, pregnancy, hormonal changes and hormone replacement, advancing age, or injury to the veins themselves.

Myth: Varicose veins are only a cosmetic problem:

The American College of Phlebology estimates that varicose veins and related vein disorders affect over 80 million Americans. These disorders can increase the risk of developing life threatening blood clots, cause open wounds on the legs, cause significant leg swelling, pain, and discomfort, and impair quality of life. The good news is varicose veins and vein disorders are highly manageable conditions.

Myth: Leg discomfort and varicose veins are a normal part of the aging process:

Leg discomfort and varicose veins are not normal at any age! Varicose veins and vein disorders however, do worsen with age. If you suffer from heaviness, aching, swelling, or fatigue of the legs and/or varicose veins, you should be evaluated by a vein specialist.

Myth: Crossing your legs can cause varicose veins:

Sitting for prolonged periods of time in any position can increase your risk of varicose veins. However, there is no medical research to support that periodic crossing of the legs causes varicose veins.

Myth: Sun exposure does not cause spider veins

Although exposure to UV light, either from the sun or tanning lights probably doesn't increase the risk of leg vein disorders, it can absolutely contribute to the development of spider veins on the face and certain types of skin cancers.

Symptoms of Venous Insufficiency

- Swollen legs or ankles
- Leg pain, aching, or heaviness
- Restless legs
- Leg cramps
- Burning or itching of the skin
- Changes in the color or texture of skin on the legs
- Varicose and spider veins
- Open sores on the lower legs

Myth: There are herbal remedies which can help varicose veins

There may be some truth to this; however it must be interpreted with caution. There is limited evidence to suggest that horse chestnut seed extract may improve some of the symptoms associated with varicose veins such as swelling, pain, and itching but it does NOT treat the underlying vein disorder. Any symptom improvement experienced while taking the herb typically returns again immediately upon cessation and it doesn't prevent vein disorders from worsening. This herb can be expensive and has a very limited place in the management of varicose veins. Taking it should never replace formal evaluation and treatment by an experienced vein specialist.

Myth: Vein treatments don't work....the varicose veins just come back later

Effective treatment starts with proper identification of the source of varicose veins. Accurate identification of vein disease has improved considerably over the past 10-15 years along with the treatments. The advanced treatment techniques used today, when paired with accurate disease identification, are far more effective in preventing a recurrence of varicose veins than the older methods. Although occasional follow up treatments may be required, most patients have good long term results.

Myth: Treatments for varicose veins leave scars and are really painful

The older methods of vein treatments often required hospitalization, were notoriously painful, and frequently left large scars. However, the new minimally invasive techniques can be done in the office, involve little discomfort, and leave minimal scars- even in the most advanced cases of varicose veins. These newer vein treatments typically include a combination of laser closure of veins, injection of unhealthy veins, and mini vein removal procedures.

Myth: Vein treatments require long and painful recoveries

Recovery from the older treatment techniques, which involved hospitalization and general anesthesia, took much longer and was much more uncomfortable. Resumption of daily activities took anywhere from four to six weeks. The newer minimally invasive treatments are done in the office setting with local anesthesia so most people resume normal activities the same day with minimal discomfort.

Myth: Vein treatments are expensive and insurance doesn't cover them

The cost of vein treatments has actually been reduced by the new technology. Advanced vein treatments can be performed in the office setting without the need for general anesthesia. This eliminates hospital charges and anesthesia fees, significantly reducing the overall cost to patients and insurances. In addition, varicose veins and related vein disorders can cause painful and debilitating symptoms making them much more than a “cosmetic” issue so most insurances do cover vein treatments. Although spider vein treatments are not covered by insurances, they have also become much more affordable with the latest treatment advances.

It is important that you are proactive with this information. Evaluation and treatment are safe, effective, and affordable when done at an experienced vein treatment center. So don't wait, seek help at a vein center near you.

Leanna L. Beaumont MSN, APNP is a board certified nurse practitioner. She is a member of the American College of Phlebology and the American College of Nurse Practitioners. She works with Dr. Terry Gueldner at The Wisconsin Vein Center in Manitowoc.