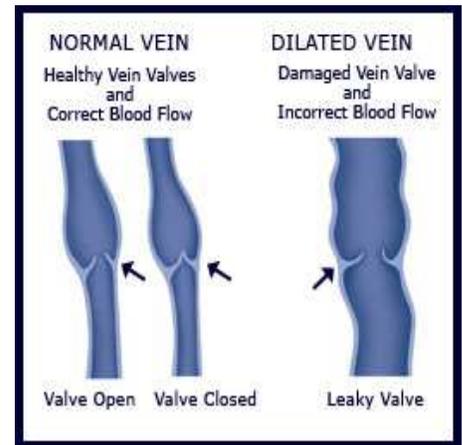


## Varicose Veins: Not Just a Cosmetic Problem

### 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 out of the legs towards the heart. There are a series of one-way check valves in the veins which prevent the backwards 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 backwards 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.



### Aren't varicose veins just ugly veins?

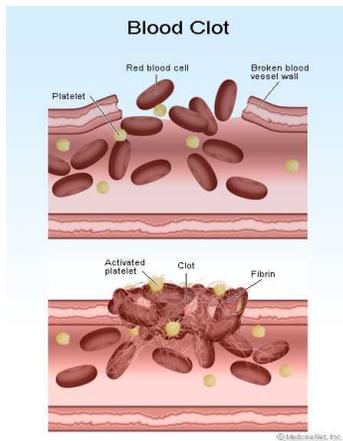
While varicose veins are unsightly, they are also an indication of a more significant venous insufficiency disorder affecting veins below that skin that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Visible signs of venous insufficiency include swollen legs or ankles, especially with prolonged standing or sitting, 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 reflux 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, advancing age, or injury to the veins themselves.

## Is venous Insufficiency dangerous?

Venous insufficiency can increase the risk of developing a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). DVT is a condition in which a blood clot forms in one of the deep veins of the legs. DVT is a serious condition



because the clot may break free of the leg veins and travel to the lungs impairing the body's ability to deliver oxygen. A blood clot in the lungs is referred to as a pulmonary embolism (PE). Together DVTs and PEs are estimated to contribute to at least 100,000 deaths each year.

About half of all DVT's occur without symptoms. Symptoms that do occur may include: significant swelling, pain, a "pulling" sensation, a change in the color of the skin, or warmth in the affected leg, ankle, or foot. Symptoms of a PE include the sudden onset of shortness of breath or chest pain, dizziness, coughing up blood, or pain with

breathing.

Inherited blood clotting disorders, long periods of immobility, cancer, heart failure, obesity, smoking, injury, surgery, hormone therapy, or pregnancy may increase the risk of developing a DVT. Fortunately DVT and PE can often be prevented by identifying and treating underlying venous disease as well as the risk factors that may contribute to this condition.

## How do I find out if I have venous insufficiency? Is it treatable?

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. This typically includes a physical examination as well as a duplex ultrasound evaluation of the leg veins. A duplex ultrasound is a painless test that uses sound waves to create pictures of the veins inside the leg, providing detailed information about the vein system.

Treatment generally begins with non invasive measures including the use of prescription strength compression stockings, weight loss, exercise, and periodic leg elevation. These particular treatments will

not cure the unhealthy refluxing veins; however, they can improve or minimize existing symptoms of venous insufficiency and slow progression of the disorder.

Definitive vein treatment methods have changed dramatically over the past several years. 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 immediate return to work and activities. These advanced vein treatments typically include a combination of laser closure of veins, injection of unhealthy veins, and mini vein removal procedures.

It is no longer necessary to suffer with painful, unsightly varicose veins and venous insufficiency. Evaluation and treatment are safe and effective when done at an experienced vein treatment center. If you think you have this disorder, be proactive and ask your health care provider about venous insufficiency. There is help available!

To learn more about venous insufficiency explore these web sites: [www.venous-info.com](http://www.venous-info.com) or [www.phlebology.org](http://www.phlebology.org).

Leanna L. Beaumont MSN, APNP is a board certified nurse practitioner with specialized training in cardiovascular and venous disorders. She is a member of the American College of Phlebology and the American College of Nurse Practitioners. She works with Dr. Terry Gueldner MD, FACS, RPhS at The Wisconsin Vein Center in Manitowoc Wisconsin, 920-686-7900.