



Varicose veins and their treatment

Introduction

Varicose veins affect up to a third of adults. If you are looking for information and advice about varicose veins and how to have them treated, this leaflet will help you.

It describes the main types of varicose veins, what causes them and the options for their treatment.

The following leaflets are also available. They provide detailed information on the different treatments to help in deciding which treatment is best for you.

- Surgery for varicose veins
- Endothermal ablation for varicose veins
- Foam sclerotherapy for varicose veins

Your circulation: how does it work?

Before looking at the types of varicose veins, it is useful to look briefly at the circulation and how it works. The circulation is driven by the heart which pumps the blood around your body.

Arteries carry the blood away from the heart and around the body to the organs and tissues. Veins collect the blood from the organs and tissues and take it back to the heart.

When the blood travels back to the heart from the feet it moves up the leg veins against gravity. This is brought about by muscle pump action and valves in the veins.

Muscle pump action When the calf muscles of the leg are active and contract, for example when you walk, the veins that run through and between them get squeezed and the blood is pushed back up the leg.

Valves These tiny one-way valves perform an important function inside the veins. They prevent blood that has been pushed up the leg from falling back down again under the influence of gravity when the leg muscles relax.

If the leg muscles become weak and/or the vein valves stop working because they are weak or damaged, then gravity 'steps in' and the blood travels down the leg veins instead of up. This 'reflux' (often called venous incompetence) brings about an increase in pressure inside the veins. This then causes the walls of the veins to stretch and become dilated and twisted, so forming the varicose veins.

Leg veins

There are two sets of veins in the leg: superficial and deep.

Superficial veins are situated directly under the skin and can be visible. These are the veins that can form varicose veins. They can also become inflamed (phlebitis).

Deep veins lie in the middle of the leg and are not visible. These veins can become filled with a blood clot to form a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Sometimes a piece of this blood breaks off and travels to the lungs where it forms a pulmonary embolus, which can be very serious.

Types of varicose veins

There are three main types of varicose veins: trunk, reticular and spider.

Trunk varicose veins

These are formed from the main superficial veins and their largest branches. They are thick and lumpy and develop near the surface of the skin where they are usually clearly visible.

Reticular veins

These are formed from smaller branches of the superficial veins. They are less lumpy and lie in the deeper layers of the skin.

Spider veins

Sometimes called thread veins, these are formed from the smallest branches. They are finer and lie in the upper layers of the skin, close to the surface, and may be red, blue or purple in colour.



Reasons for treatment

Patients ask for advice and treatment for their varicose veins for several reasons, the main ones being:

- Concern about the appearance of the leg.
- Symptoms such as a feeling of heaviness in the leg, aching, pain, irritation or itching of the skin.
- Needing advice about possible complications such as DVT, varicose eczema and skin ulcers.

Initial assessment

We are pleased to offer a choice of appointment times and convenient locations. Your initial assessment will include:

- An appointment with a consultant vascular specialist, supported by a nurse specialist and a sonographer if appropriate.
- A patient-focused assessment and examination.
- A one-stop consultation: a duplex ultrasound scan, to produce a detailed picture of the veins and blood flow in your legs, carried out at the same visit where possible.

Types of treatment

We can offer the following types of treatment.

Surgery

Surgery is the traditional way of dealing with thick, lumpy varicose veins.

Radiofrequency ablation

Radiofrequency ablation (RFA) using the Venefit system® is a minimally invasive procedure suitable for treating trunk varicose veins.

Endovenous laser treatment

Endovenous laser treatment (EVLT) is a minimally invasive keyhole procedure that uses laser-carrying fibres to treat the veins directly.

Ultrasound guided foam sclerotherapy

Ultrasound guided foam sclerotherapy (UGFS) is suitable for treating trunk veins and large reticular veins.

Liquid sclerotherapy

Liquid sclerotherapy is a well-established procedure for improving the appearance of small reticular veins and thread or spider veins.

See page 6 for details of leaflets that explain the different types of treatments.

Patient-tailored plan

The treatment that is best for you will depend partly on the type of varicose veins present in your leg and partly on your preferences. Your specialist will consult with you to draw up a treatment plan that is suited to your requirements and preferences.

For more information

These accompanying leaflets provide details on the different treatments available.

- **Surgery for varicose veins**
- **Endothermal ablation for varicose veins**
- **Foam sclerotherapy for varicose veins**

For additional information and guidance see NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence www.nice.org.uk

Contact us

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