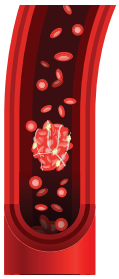
Your Vascular Health™

A Guide for Patients: Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)

What is DVT?

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) happens when a blood clot forms in a deep vein, usually in the leg. The clot can slow or block blood flow and cause pain or swelling. If part of the clot breaks off and moves to the lungs, it can cause a pulmonary embolism, a serious condition which can be life-threatening. DVT is an emergency and needs fast care to prevent more problems.



What to Look For

- Swelling in one leg, usually in the calf or thigh
- Pain or soreness that may get worse when standing or walking
- Warmth and redness on the skin of the leg
- Skin that looks bluish or reddish
- Veins that look larger or feel firm to the touch
- A heavy or tired feeling in the leg

Serious cases of DVT, like a pulmonary embolism, can cause:

- Sudden shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- A fast heartbeat
- Coughing up blood

Causes and Risks

You are more likely to get DVT if you:

- Sit still for long periods of time
- Have had surgery, especially those in the legs or stomach
- Have damage to a vein from a broken bone or a bad muscle injury
- Are overweight
- Are pregnant
- Are taking medicines with hormones
- Smoke
- Have someone in your family who has had blood clots, or if you've had DVT before
- Are older
- Have certain health problems like cancer, heart disease or blood disorders

Talk to a Doctor

People should see a doctor if they notice signs of DVT, such as swelling, pain, warmth or redness in one leg. If you have risk factors for DVT, make sure to tell your doctor. Getting checked early can help find DVT sooner and prevent serious problems.

Recognizing DVT

A doctor will use a mix of exams, imaging tests and lab tests to check for DVT. The steps may include:

- Medical history and physical exam: Your doctor will ask about your symptoms, health history and risks. They will check your leg for swelling, redness, warmth or pain.
- D-dimer blood test: This test looks for a substance in your blood called D-dimer. Your body makes D-dimer when a blood clot breaks down. High levels may mean there is a clot.
- Imaging tests such as:
    - Doppler ultrasound: Uses sound waves to show blood flow in your veins. It can spot clots and check how blood is moving.
    - Venography: A dye is put into a vein, and X-ray images show any blockages from clots.
    - CT or MRI venography: These tests use detailed images to look at veins and find clots.

If DVT is found, your doctor may do more tests to find the cause and check your risk for other problems. Treatment will depend on how serious the clot is and your overall health.

Role of a Vascular Surgeon

If you have DVT symptoms, you may want to ask your doctor if a vascular surgeon is right for you. Vascular surgeons are the only specialists trained to recognize and treat the full spectrum of vascular diseases. They can provide treatments, including medication, compression therapy and, if needed, blood clot removal.

Treatment

Your doctor will decide the best treatment for you. The main treatments for deep vein thrombosis (DVT) include:

- **Blood thinner medicine:** These medicines, called anticoagulants, help stop new clots from forming and keep existing ones from getting bigger. Some people take these medicines for a few months, while others may need them longer.
- **Compression therapy:** Wearing special compression socks or wraps helps improve blood flow, reduce swelling and ease pain or heaviness in the leg.
- **Elevation:** Raising your leg above the level of your heart can help lower swelling and improve blood flow.
- **Clot-busting medicine:** In severe cases, doctors may use medicine that breaks up clots quickly. The medicine is given through a thin tube (catheter) directly into the clot.
- **IVC filter:** If you cannot take blood thinners or they don't work well, a doctor might place a small filter in a large vein called the inferior vena cava. The filter catches blood clots before they can reach the lungs.
- **Surgery to remove the clot:** In very serious cases, doctors may remove the clot to restore blood flow and prevent more problems.

It's important to follow up with your doctor regularly to make sure the treatment is working and to prevent future clots.