

A Guide for Patients: Varicose and Spider Veins

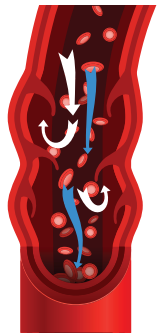


What are varicose and spider veins?

Varicose and spider veins are large, twisted, blue veins that you can see under the skin on your legs. They happen when pressure builds up inside the leg veins and are not just a cosmetic issue. They can be a sign of a bigger, painful issue that causes blood to flow backward and collect in the lower leg veins.

About 40 million Americans have varicose veins. If they are not treated, they can get worse over time.

Varicose veins form because gravity puts pressure on the veins as they push blood back up to the heart. Treatment helps improve comfort, leg health and overall blood flow.



Symptoms

These symptoms can be mild or severe and may get worse over time if not treated.

-  Veins that look swollen, twisted or bulging
-  Small, thin “spider” veins close to the skin
-  Aching or heavy feeling in the legs, especially after sitting or standing for a long time
-  Swelling, often around the ankles
-  Itching or burning near the veins
-  Pain or discomfort that gets worse after long periods of standing or sitting
-  Skin changes, such as redness, irritation or sores
-  Restless legs or cramps, especially at night

Causes and Risks

The following can cause you to get varicose veins or make it more likely to happen:

- Older age: People between 30 and 70 are more likely to develop varicose veins.
- Pregnancy: About half of women get varicose veins during pregnancy. In most cases, the veins return to normal within a year after giving birth.
- Multiple pregnancies: Women with several pregnancies may develop varicose veins that don't go away.
- Family history
- Extra body weight
- When you stand or sit for a long time without movement: Extra weight puts pressure on the leg veins.



Recognizing Varicose Veins

A vascular surgeon will look at your medical history, do a physical exam, and check any visible veins. You may also have a duplex ultrasound test, sometimes called a venous reflux study. This painless test uses sound waves to show how blood moves through your veins and to find what's causing varicose veins. It helps the doctor see the vein structure and how well blood is flowing, which helps the doctor provide the right treatment.

Role of a Vascular Surgeon



If you have varicose vein symptoms, you may want to ask your doctor if a vascular surgeon is right for you. Vascular surgeons are the only specialists trained to diagnose and treat the full spectrum of vascular diseases. They can suggest lifestyle changes and offer simple, low-risk treatments.

Treatment

Most doctors first suggest lifestyle changes to help manage varicose veins, such as:

- ✓ Keeping a healthy weight
- ✓ Raising your legs when resting
- ✓ Avoiding sitting or standing for long periods
- ✓ Wearing compression socks

If lifestyle changes don't help enough, a vascular surgeon may recommend other treatments:

- ✓ **Sclerotherapy:** This treatment seals the vein with a medicine that is injected into it. It's mainly used for smaller "spider veins" and is done in the doctor's office. The injection keeps the vein from filling with blood.
- ✓ **Vein stripping:** This treatment is used for larger or more serious varicose veins. The doctor makes two small cuts—one near the groin and one below the knee—to remove the problem veins. It's usually done as a procedure where you go home the same day.
- ✓ **Radiofrequency or laser treatment:** The doctor puts a small fiber inside the vein using a thin tube called a catheter. The fiber gives off heat that closes the damaged part of the vein. This treatment can be done alone or with another procedure to remove small groups of varicose veins through tiny cuts.