

Overview

Varicose veins

- Overview
- [Symptoms](#)
- [Causes](#)
- [Diagnosis](#)
- [Treatment](#)
- [Self-management](#)

Varicose veins are swollen and enlarged veins visible under the skin that usually occur on the legs and feet. They may be blue or dark purple and are often lumpy, bulging or twisted in appearance.

Varicose veins usually cause no symptoms but may be associated with:

- aching, heavy and uncomfortable legs
- swollen feet and ankles
- burning or throbbing in your legs
- muscle cramp in your legs, particularly at night
- dry, itchy and thin skin over the affected vein
- eczema

The symptoms are usually worse during warm weather or if you've been standing up for long periods of time. They may improve when you walk around or raise your legs when resting.

Read more about the [symptoms of varicose veins](#)

When to see your GP

If you have varicose veins and they do not cause you any discomfort, you may not need to visit your GP.

Varicose veins are rarely a serious condition and do not usually need treatment.

But speak to your GP if:

- your varicose veins are causing you pain or discomfort
- the skin over your veins is sore and irritated
- the aching in your legs is causing irritation at night and disturbing your sleep

Your GP can diagnose varicose veins based on these symptoms. Sometimes further tests may be carried out.

Causes of varicose veins

Varicose veins develop when the small valves inside the veins stop working properly.

In a healthy vein, blood flows smoothly to the heart. The blood is prevented from flowing backwards by a series of tiny valves that open and close to let blood through.

If the valves weaken or are damaged, the blood can flow backwards and collect in the vein. This will eventually cause the vein to be swollen and enlarged (varicose).

Your chances of developing varicose veins are increased if you:

- are female
- have a close family member with varicose veins
- are older
- are overweight
- have a job that involves long periods of standing
- are pregnant

Read more about the [causes of varicose veins](#)

Treating varicose veins

If treatment is necessary, your GP may first recommend that you:

- wear compression stockings for 6 months
- take regular exercise
- elevate your feet when resting

If your varicose veins are still causing you pain or discomfort, or they cause complications, they can be treated in several ways.

The most common treatment options include:

- endothermal ablation – where heat is used to seal affected veins
- sclerotherapy – this uses special foam to close the veins
- ligation and stripping – the affected veins are surgically removed

Read more about [treatment for varicose veins](#)

Preventing varicose veins

There's little evidence to suggest you can stop varicose veins getting worse or prevent new ones developing.

But there are ways to ease symptoms of existing varicose veins, such as:

- avoiding standing or sitting still for long periods and trying to move around every 30 minutes
- taking regular breaks throughout the day, raising the legs on pillows while resting to ease discomfort
- exercising regularly – this can improve circulation and help maintain a healthy weight

Types of varicose veins

There are several types of varicose veins, such as:

Trunk varicose veins

These are near to the surface of the skin and are thick and knobbly. They're often long and can look unsightly.

Reticular varicose veins

These are red and sometimes grouped close together in a network.

Telangiectasia varicose vein

These are also known as thread veins or spider veins. These are small clusters of blue or red veins that sometimes appear on your face or legs.

They're harmless and, unlike trunk varicose veins, don't bulge underneath the surface of the skin.

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