



Help for Varicose Veins & Spider Veins: Knowing Your Options

With very little attention from us, healthy veins work hard to keep us alive and kicking. They perform one of many critical functions of the cardiovascular system, specifically, returning blood to the heart to get the oxygen and nutrients the body needs. For many of us, it's only when something goes wrong with our veins—especially if it causes us pain or embarrassment—that we appreciate how important veins are to our health.

If you have pain, heaviness, or swelling in your leg and you're not sure why, or you can see veins that are purple, twisted, and raised above the skin, you may have **varicose veins** or **spider veins**. But you can do something about it—on your own and with the help of your doctor.

Usually varicose veins and spider veins can be treated with self-care and on an outpatient basis, with little or no pain and a quick recovery. However, in some cases, problems in the veins, such as **blood clots**, can put your life at risk. So, it's always a good idea to check with your doctor to identify the problem and learn as much as you can about your options for treatment.

What Are Varicose Veins & Spider Veins?

Veins are designed to move blood in one direction—to the heart. Valves inside the veins keep the blood from flowing backward. If a vein or its valves become weak or damaged, then blood can seep back into the veins in the leg, where it collects instead of circulating as it should. Varicose and spider veins are veins that are swollen from the blood that has collected there.

What Can I Do to Look & Feel Better?

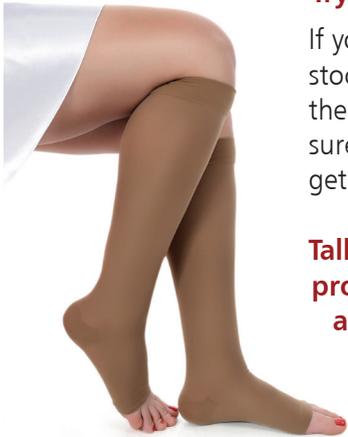
Whether it's for cosmetic reasons, to relieve pain and discomfort, or to prevent more problems in the future, varicose and spider veins can be treated.

Begin by taking care of yourself.

Self-care is free and you can start today. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Keep moving.** Exercise, especially walking, is a great way to keep your blood flowing.
- **Avoid sitting or standing for long periods.** If you sit at a desk all day long, try to move around every half an hour or so. If you stand for hours, shift your weight back and forth from one foot to the other. When you move, your blood moves, and that's good for your veins.
- **Keep both feet on the ground.** Crossing your legs is bad for circulation and bad for your veins.
- **Maintain a healthy weight and avoid salt.** Excess weight and water retention from too much salt increases pressure on the veins and reduces blood circulation.
- **Avoid high heels and clothing that fits tightly around your waist and legs.** Both can interfere with keeping the blood moving in your legs.
- **Stop smoking.** You already know that you should quit. Vein health is one more good reason to finally do it.
- **Elevate the leg that hurts.** Recline and rest. Prop up your leg with pillows — your feet should be at least six inches above your heart.
- **Apply warm and moist compresses.**





Try compression stockings.

If you still have pain, compression stockings can reduce and prevent the swelling that causes it. Make sure to check with your doctor to get the right fit.

Talk with your healthcare provider about medication and medical procedures.

Your doctor may prescribe medication, such as pain-killers and blood thinners, to give you

relief from symptoms and to treat the problem. **It is extremely important that you follow your doctor's instructions about taking the medication and continue taking it until your doctor tells you it is okay to stop.**

Your doctor may also recommend a medical procedure to close or remove the vein so that blood will no longer flow back through it and cause symptoms. The blood finds a new path to the heart through healthy veins, and the old vein shrivels up and disappears.

Advances in technology have also made it possible to treat veins with **minimally invasive procedures** that are generally less painful, have fewer complications, and require less time for recovery. Treated veins can reappear, but regular exercise and wearing compression stockings may make it less likely and reduce the risk of new problems in the veins.

Two of these minimally invasive procedures commonly used to treat varicose and spider veins are **sclerotherapy** and **venous ablation**.

- **Sclerotherapy** is the injection of either a liquid or foam solution to shrink the vein until it eventually disappears. This procedure is typically performed in a doctor's office and does not require anesthesia. It is primarily used to treat smaller varicose veins and spider veins that are too small or twisted for catheter-based treatment. Sclerotherapy can require multiple treatments every four to six weeks to eliminate the problem veins. There is some risk of stinging and redness at the site of the injection as well as bruising and swelling, but in most cases patients can return to their normal activities immediately after the 20- to 30-minute procedure.

- **Venous ablation** uses lasers or radio waves to close a vein that is not working. This type of procedure can also be performed in a doctor's office but with local anesthesia. A narrow, flexible tool called a **catheter** is inserted into the vein to guide a probe that uses laser or radio waves to close the vein. This procedure may not work for smaller veins but if they are connected to a larger vein that is receiving treatment, they may disappear too. Most varicose veins treated with this procedure will not reappear, but it's not guaranteed. There is some risk of bruising and numbing with this procedure, but most patients experience little or no pain before and after the treatment, and they can return to their normal activities immediately after the procedure, which typically takes less than an hour.

What Questions Should I Ask My Healthcare Provider About Varicose Veins & Spider Veins?

- Do I need medical treatment for my **varicose veins**? Will they get worse if they're not treated? How do I know if I need **immediate medical attention**?
- What are my **treatment options**? What combination of lifestyle, medications, and **medical procedures** may be necessary to combat the disease? What are the **side effects** and **risk of complications** from these procedures?
- Do I need a **specialist** for treatment? What kind of specialist?
- Will I be able to have my desired **quality of life**? What can I do to improve the odds of this?

What Should I Do If I Have More Questions?

Ask them. Any time you have a healthcare decision to make, the conversations you have with your doctor are the key to successful results. Be sure your doctor is aware of all of your symptoms as well as any medications, vitamins, and supplements you are taking.

We hope you will use SecondsCount.org to learn more about your cardiovascular health and treatment options. SecondsCount.org was developed by the Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions (SCAI), the medical society for interventional cardiologists.