

What are varicose veins?

Varicose veins are dilated blood vessels that are visible and at times can be felt. They are usually present on the legs, more common in females and can lead to major distress. The veins can first appear as thin greenish streaks and increase in size and in some cases reach a few centimetres in diameter. Up to 50% of patients may have some signs and symptoms of a pulling feeling; pain; itchiness; swelling at the ankles; eczema; spider veins next to the big varicose veins; and change in colour around the veins.

There are various theories as to the cause of the varicose veins, the main one being genetic factors. Other causes could be the use of contraceptive hormones; pregnancy; standing for long hours; obesity and deep vein thrombosis, to name a few.

Veins carry blood back to the heart and those on the legs consist of two systems, the deep and the superficial venous networks. The deep system carries the bulk of the blood back to the heart, whilst the superficial system acts more as a reservoir. However, any resistance to the flow of the venous blood from the deep system increases the pressure on the superficial veins and with time they get dilated and result in varicosities. Basically there is a complex anatomy of veins in the legs consisting of, the longest vein in the body called the long saphenous vein, the lesser saphenous vein, perforating veins and many unnamed superficial veins.

A few treatment modalities are available for varicose veins, some being more invasive than others. Traditionally the only treatment available was venous stripping, which entails the removal of the varicose veins by tying them at the origin and stripping the smaller veins by making small holes along the leg. This treatment is starting to become obsolete, as new methods, which are less painful and less invasive are more accessible now. Another method is by making use of an Endovenous radiofrequency machine. The machine is quite costly; however the treatment is less traumatic.

The method that is the least painful and least traumatic to the patient is sclerotherapy. The veins are injected by a substance, which causes the veins to shrink and with time disappear. There is no downtime and the bigger the varicose vein the easier the treatment. The patient needs to keep the legs bandaged for one week; however the patient will be able to perform most daily activities. The procedure is performed in the doctor's rooms so there is no theatre fee. In a few cases, a repeat treatment is needed in one month's time; however, success rates are very good.

All treatments for varicose veins carry comparable success. Once somebody has varicose veins, recurrence is common and re-treatment with sclerotherapy is easy.

By Dr R Newaj