

Varicose Veins

Varicose veins are swollen, bulgy, twisted veins that are visible just below the skin's surface. They may cause leg pain and swelling and can be cosmetically unappealing. The December 26, 2012, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about varicose veins.

CAUSES

Varicose veins develop when the veins in the leg do not work properly. Healthy veins carry blood from the legs to the heart and use the small valves inside of them to help move the blood in the right direction, back to the heart. Varicose veins arise when these valves become damaged or the vein walls weaken, causing blood to pool in the legs. This can happen for a number of reasons:

- Varicose veins can be seen commonly within a family.
- Female sex, multiple pregnancies, being tall, being overweight
- Previous blood clots or traumatic damage to valves can weaken their ability to move blood back to the heart.
- Prolonged sitting or standing

SYMPTOMS

- Swollen, heavy, tired, aching legs
- Dry, itchy skin; changes in skin color
- Swollen legs and ankles, sometimes with open sores called **venous ulcers**

TREATMENT AND CARE

To reduce swelling and discomfort:

- Walk around, and try not to sit or stand in one place for an extended period.
- Raise and rest your legs 3 to 4 times a day for a period of 30 minutes.
- Point and flex your feet 10 to 15 times.

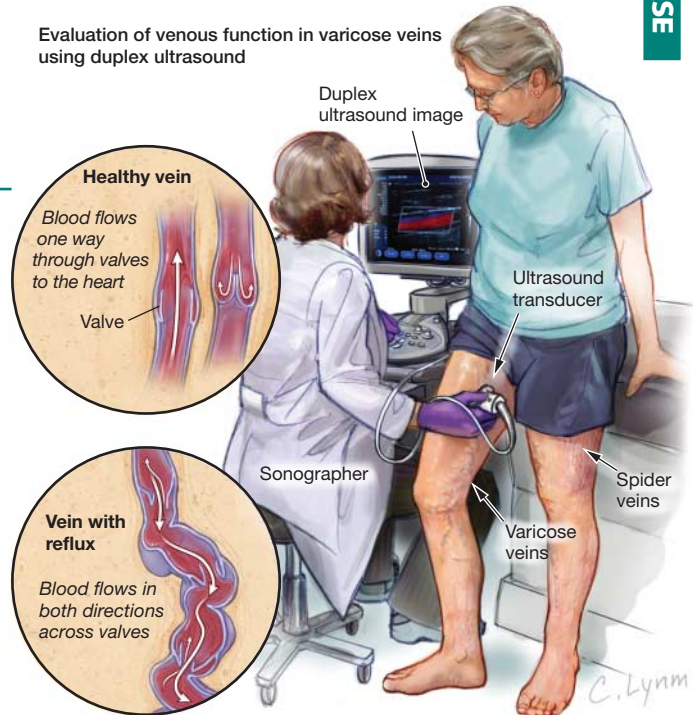
To treat dry and itchy skin, apply an unscented moisturizing cream. Ask your doctor about the right cream or ointment to apply to avoid a rash or irritation.

Your doctor may recommend specialized treatment such as **compression stockings**, special socks that fit tightly over the legs and ankle and are available both over the counter and with a prescription.

WHERE TO START

If you are having trouble with your veins, start by making an appointment to visit your primary care physician. He or she can conduct an evaluation that might include an ultrasound examination. Your physician may refer you to a vascular surgeon, a dermatologist, or a radiologist.

Evaluation of venous function in varicose veins using duplex ultrasound



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/vv/
- American Venous Forum www.veinforum.org

INFORM YOURSELF

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Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Mayo Clinic; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

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