

VARICOSE AND SPIDER VEINS

by: Nadiv Shapira, MD

You see them just below the surface of your skin - unsightly areas of purple, red and blue lines that look like urban roadmaps. Spider veins are common, affecting nearly fifty percent of men and women over 50 years of age, and are most prevalent on thighs and lower legs.



Unlike varicose veins that are large,ropy and sometimes painful, spider veins are small and easily treated.

What Causes Spider Veins?

Healthy veins carry blood to the heart through a series of one-way valves. These valves allow blood to flow in the right direction from superficial veins to deeper veins, and from deeper veins to the heart. The veins are surrounded by muscles which contract and help pump blood to the heart. Normally the one-way valves prevent backflow. However, defective valves allow blood to flow backward and pool inside the veins (venous insufficiency). As blood pools within the veins, pressure builds and the vessel wall weakens. As a result, the veins tend to bulge and twist. Depending on the size and location of the veins; larger veins that are located beneath the skin will develop varicose veins, while tiny veins located close to the surface of the skin will become spider veins.

Where Are They Located?

The force of gravity, the pressure of body weight, and the task of carrying blood from the bottom of the body up to the heart make legs the primary location for spider veins. This pressure can be stronger than the veins' one-way valves. Therefore, spider veins are most common in the thighs, ankles and feet.

Who gets Spider Veins?

Risk factors for spider veins include:
increasing age, family members with vein problems or being born with weak vein valves,
Hormonal changes. These occur during puberty, pregnancy, and menopause. Taking birth control pills and other medicines

containing estrogen and progesterone also increases the risk of varicose or spider veins.

Occupation that requires prolonged standing. Obesity, leg injury and other things that weaken vein valves.

Sun exposure, which can cause spider veins on the cheeks or nose of a fair-skinned person.

Preventing Spider Veins

Not all spider veins can be prevented, but some things can reduce your chances of getting new ones.

Wear sunscreen to protect your skin from the sun and to limit spider veins on the face.

Exercise regularly to improve your leg strength, circulation, and vein strength. Focus on exercises that work your legs, such as walking or running.

Control your weight to avoid placing too much pressure on your legs.

Do not cross your legs when sitting.

Elevate your legs when resting as much as possible.

Do not stand or sit for long periods of time. If you must stand for a long time, shift your weight from one leg to the other every few minutes. If you must sit for long periods of time, stand up and move around or take a short walk every 30 minutes.

Wear elastic support stockings

Avoid tight clothing that constricts your waist, groin, or legs.

Eat a low-salt diet rich in high-fiber foods. High-fiber foods include fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains, like bran. Eating too much salt can cause you to retain water or swell.

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Diagnosis and Treatment

Spider veins can be diagnosed by looking at them. A more thorough evaluation, including an ultrasound examination, may be needed in patient who has symptoms such as throbbing, burning or tingling sensation that may suggest venous insufficiency. You may want to speak with a doctor who specializes in vein diseases (a phlebologist) and discuss what treatment options are best for your spider veins and lifestyle. Not all cases are the same!

The simplest treatment is to pull on a pair of support stockings and to adopt life style changes including weight lose, regular walking, leg elevation and low-salt diet.

If treatment is desired to get rid of spider veins, the available options include sclerotherapy and laser therapy, both can be done at the doctor's office and do not require anesthesia.

Sclerotherapy

Sclerotherapy is the most common treatment to get rid of spider veins. Through a tiny needle, a solution is injected into the vein which causes the vein walls to swell, stick together, and seal shut. This stops the flow of blood and in a few weeks, the vein should fade. This treatment is highly effective if done the right way. Most patients can expect that 80% of the treated veins will wipe out. The injection which is done through a tiny needle does not hurt.

Laser Surgery

During laser surgery, bursts of laser light are applied through the skin onto the spider veins. The machine is specially calibrated to target and heat the red and blue veins while leaving the surrounding skin undamaged. This will make the vein slowly fade and disappear. Laser surgery is more appealing to some patients because it does not use needles. Still, when the laser hits the skin, the patient feels a heat sensation that can be quite painful. Cooling helps reduce the pain.

Nadiv Shapira, MD practiced adult cardiac and thoracic surgery for over 20 years in the Christiana Care Health System, in Delaware. Recognizing the need for improvement in the care of venous disease, Dr. Shapira established First State Vein and Laser Center in Delaware, utilizing minimally invasive treatments for all forms of venous disease including spider veins, large and small varicose veins, leg swelling, and skin ulcerations. He is a diplomat of the American Board of Surgery and the American Board of Thoracic Surgery, fellow in the American College of Surgeons, the Society for Thoracic Surgery and the American College of Phlebology. Dr. Shapira's office is located at the "Neuroscience and Surgical Institute of DE", 774 Christiana Rd., Suite 202, Newark DE 19713 and can be reached at 302 294 0700 or at: nshapira@christianacare.org.



FAQ

Q: If I Get Rid of Spider Veins, Will They Return?

A: Spider vein therapy treats current spider veins but does not prevent new ones. Regardless of treatment, you should anticipate the development of new spider veins over time, just as you would if your spider veins had not been treated. Wearing elastic support stockings and changes in life style such as regular exercise, proper diet and weight loss will reduce the chance of developing new spider veins.

Q: I am seven months into my first pregnancy and have widespread varicose and spider veins that are painful and make my legs look terrible. I am anxious and willing to undergo any treatment to get rid of these veins. What should I do?

A: Varicose and Spider veins are often seen during pregnancy. Compression hoses of 30-40 mm Hg and elevation of the legs will most likely relief the pain and decrease the swelling. Any treatment should be deferred until enough time has passed for natural post delivery improvement to occur. You should be evaluated 4-6 months after delivery to evaluate whether there is a significant reflux which may warrant intervention. Make sure to ware the compression hoses during your next pregnancy.

Q: Will medical insurance pay for sclerotherapy or laser treatment of spider veins?

A: Medical insurance will cover surgery for treatment of symptomatic spider or varicose veins but NOT if it is done for cosmetic reasons.

Q: What happens after sclerotherapy treatment?

A: You will have no problem with walking right after treatment. After the first 2 days, most patients can resume their normal activities. There is some mild pain which can easily be overcome with Tylenol. The injected site will appear bruised and swollen for a few days. Continual wearing of the compression hose will relieve the swelling and pain. The bruising usually disappears in 2-3 weeks.