

Varicose veins: not just a cosmetic problem

It's a common problem, but many don't want to talk about it because they don't know about the range of treatment.

[Greg Ward, MD](#), is talking about varicose veins.

"It's not just cosmetic. It's a leaky plumbing problem," says the OSF HealthCare general surgeon with decades of experience in vein health.

The basics

Dr. Ward says varicose veins pop up when one-way valves in the vein become weakened or damaged, causing blood to collect in the vein. In other words, the blood flows backward down the leg instead of back up to the heart. Varicose veins can appear raised, bulging and twisted. They can look red, blue or flesh colored.

Dr. Ward says varicose veins impact more women than men and more older people than younger.

"Varicose veins can be painful," Dr. Ward warns. "Commonly, we see aching legs, especially as the day goes on.

"If you don't see veins but have legs that are progressively tired, achy and swelling through the day, you may have varicose vein problems," he adds.

Varicose veins are related to but different than spider veins, which are caused by the enlargement of a small group of veins near the skin's surface. They often look red or purple and are in a spiderweb pattern, hence the name.

Treatment

For any vein issue, an ultrasound is the first step to determine the best treatment.

On one end of the treatment spectrum is a support hose (also called compression stockings). These help improve blood circulation. Dr. Ward says everyone with varicose veins should wear a support hose. For some, the hose may do the trick. Others may pair the hose with more advanced treatment.

Dr. Ward says a doctor may inject you with medicine to seal the veins closed. For bigger veins, a provider may do a laser ablation procedure to close the leak.

"The other veins that are healthy take over and get the blood back to the heart more effectively," Dr. Ward explains. "Then the legs don't hurt."

For these in-office procedures, Dr. Ward says people typically have little to no downtime before resuming normal activities.

Prevention

Experts don't know the exact cause for varicose and spider veins. But some contributing factors include being overweight, sitting or standing for long periods, lifting heavy objects, being female, pregnancy and having a family history of vein issues.

So be mindful of your daily activities. If you are at a desk all day for work, take breaks and walk around. Conversely, if you are on your feet all day (for example, a construction worker or fast-food worker), take breaks and sit down. When lifting, use the proper technique. Keep your back straight, and bend at the knees, not the waist. If you have to lift heavy objects often, use a cart or dolly or get a friend to help. And stick to a healthy diet and exercise routine to avoid becoming overweight.