

Varicose veins

Symptoms and causes

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Symptoms

Varicose veins may not cause any pain. Signs you may have with varicose veins include:

- Veins that are dark purple or blue in color
- Veins that appear twisted and bulging; often like cords on your legs

When painful signs and symptoms occur, they may include:

- An achy or heavy feeling in your legs
- Burning, throbbing, muscle cramping and swelling in your lower legs
- Worsened pain after sitting or standing for a long time
- Itching around one or more of your veins
- Bleeding from varicose veins
- A painful cord in the vein with red discoloration of the skin
- Color changes, hardening of the vein, inflammation of the skin or skin ulcers near your ankle, which can mean you have a serious form of vascular disease that requires medical attention

Spider veins are similar to varicose veins, but they're smaller. Spider veins are found closer to the skin's surface and are often red or blue.

They occur on the legs, but can also be found on the face. Spider veins vary in size and often look like a spider's web.

When to see a doctor

Self-care — such as exercise, elevating your legs or wearing compression stockings — can help you ease the pain of varicose veins and may prevent them from getting worse. But if you're concerned about how your veins look and feel and self-care measures haven't stopped your

condition from getting worse, see your doctor.

Causes

Arteries carry blood from your heart to the rest of your tissues. Veins return blood from the rest of your body to your heart, so the blood can be recirculated. To return blood to your heart, the veins in your legs must work against gravity.

Muscle contractions in your lower legs act as pumps, and elastic vein walls help blood return to your heart. Tiny valves in your veins open as blood flows toward your heart then close to stop blood from flowing backward.

Causes of varicose veins can include:

- **Age.** As you get older, your veins can lose elasticity, causing them to stretch. The valves in your veins may become weak, allowing blood that should be moving toward your heart to flow backward.

Blood pools in your veins, and your veins enlarge and become varicose. The veins appear blue because they contain deoxygenated blood, which is in the process of being recirculated through the lungs.

- **Pregnancy.** Some pregnant women develop varicose veins. Pregnancy increases the volume of blood in your body, but decreases the flow of blood from your legs to your pelvis. This circulatory change is designed to support the growing fetus, but it can produce an unfortunate side effect — enlarged veins in your legs.

Varicose veins may surface for the first time or may worsen during late pregnancy, when your uterus exerts greater pressure on the veins in your legs. Changes in your hormones during pregnancy also may play a role. Varicose veins that develop during pregnancy generally improve without medical treatment three to 12 months after delivery.

Risk factors

These factors increase your risk of developing varicose veins:

- **Age.** The risk of varicose veins increases with age. Aging causes wear and tear on the valves in your veins that help regulate blood flow. Eventually, that wear causes the valves to allow some blood to flow back into your veins where it collects instead of flowing up to your heart.
- **Sex.** Women are more likely to develop the condition. Hormonal changes during pregnancy, premenstruation or menopause may be a factor because female hormones tend to relax vein walls. Taking hormone replacement therapy or birth control pills may increase your risk of varicose veins.
- **Family history.** If other family members had varicose veins, there's a greater chance you

will too.

- **Obesity.** Being overweight puts added pressure on your veins.
- **Standing or sitting for long periods of time.** Your blood doesn't flow as well if you're in the same position for long periods.

Complications

Complications of varicose veins, although rare, can include:

- **Ulcers.** Extremely painful ulcers may form on the skin near varicose veins, particularly near the ankles. Ulcers are caused by long-term fluid buildup in these tissues, caused by increased pressure of blood within affected veins.

A discolored spot on the skin usually begins before an ulcer forms. See your doctor immediately if you suspect you've developed an ulcer.

- **Blood clots.** Occasionally, veins deep within the legs become enlarged. In such cases, the affected leg may swell considerably. Any sudden leg swelling warrants urgent medical attention because it may indicate a blood clot — a condition known medically as thrombophlebitis.
- **Bleeding.** Occasionally, veins very close to the skin may burst. This usually causes only minor bleeding. But, any bleeding warrants medical attention because there's a high risk it can happen again.