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Successful treatments for varicose veins exist

Less risk involved

If you are bothered by varicose veins, a day of holiday shopping might not be your idea of fun.

These bulging, twisted veins, most often seen on the legs, can be solely a cosmetic problem. But varicose veins also can cause pain, fatigue, heaviness and swelling in the legs, and at their most severe can lead to inflamed skin and skin ulcers.

Fortunately, says local cardiovascular surgeon Dr. Chris Peters, we understand the underlying causes of varicose veins and vein disease better than we used to. This has led to new treatments that offer greater success and less risk.

Peters explains that healthy leg veins have valves that open and close to keep blood flowing and help it return to the heart. (By contrast, arteries carry blood away from the heart and do not have such valves.) Sometimes these valves and the walls of the veins weaken. This allows blood to flow backward, a condition called venous reflux disease. Reflux typically occurs in the superficial veins, a network of veins close to the surface of the skin. Blood then pools in these veins and increases pressure, resulting in leg pain and swelling.

"There is a hereditary component to varicose veins for some folks," Peters said. "Other factors are a personal history of vein problems, being a woman and being overweight."

Many women trace the onset of their varicose veins to pregnancy, when weight gain, increased blood volume, the pressure of the fetus and hormonal factors put stress on the leg veins.

The traditional treatment is a surgical procedure called vein stripping. It involves tying off a large superficial vein (the saphenous vein) near the groin and then pulling it out through an incision near the calf. The procedure is typically done under general or spinal anesthesia, and recovery can be slow and uncomfortable.

Newer procedures are much less invasive, and some can be done in the doctor's office.

Peters performs one called VNUS Closure. This procedure uses a tiny catheter, inserted through an incision in the leg, to deliver radiofrequency energy to the diseased vein. This heats the vein wall, causing it to shrink and collapse. Blood flow is diverted to veins that lie deeper in the leg, and the diseased vein turns into fibrous tissue. Patients return to their normal routine almost immediately and notice vast improvement in one to two weeks.



Denice Connell

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Procedures such as VNUS Closure can also help people living with a more severe condition called venous stasis disease. Men are at higher risk for this condition, Peters said. Other risk factors include obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Wound care also can be complicated by vein disease, and treating the underlying disease can mean vast improvement.

Denice Connell writes about health issues for Mercy Hospital in Iowa City. Her column on men's and women's health will appear the third Monday of the month. Contact her by calling 339-3676 or e-mail denice.connell@mercyic.org.

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