

Reducing Your Risk of Blood Clots or VTEs

What is a VTE?

Blood clots that develop in the veins of the body are known as Venous Thromboembolism or VTE. Sometimes these clots develop while a person is hospitalized or on bed rest for a long time.

Blood clots occur when the blood, which is in liquid form, thickens to a solid inside the vein. This is called a Thrombus. When this happens, the normal blood flow in the vein slows or stops. A blood clot in a leg vein is called a Deep Vein Thrombosis or DVT.

SYMPTOMS OF A POSSIBLE DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS INCLUDE:

- Pain and/or tenderness in one leg
- Swelling of the leg
- Warmth and redness of the skin of the leg
- If part of the clot in the leg breaks free, it can travel to the lung. This is called a Pulmonary Embolus or PE (pulmonary=lung, embolism=travelling clot).

SYMPTOMS OF POSSIBLE PULMONARY EMBOLUS INCLUDE:

- Feeling out of breath
- Chest pain
- Sudden collapse
- Coughing up blood

AM I AT RISK FOR VENOUS THROMBOEMBOLISM?

Sometimes blood clots develop in otherwise healthy people. However, the risk of developing a Deep Vein Thrombosis or a Pulmonary Embolus can be increased if you are in the hospital.

Things that increase your chances of having a blood clot while in the hospital include:

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- Not being able to move around
- Being bedridden or confined to bed for several days
- Recent surgery; medical illness
- Heart or lung disease; stroke
- Major trauma
- Infection or cancer
- Previous Deep Vein Thrombosis or Pulmonary Embolus

Other factors that can increase your risk of developing a blood clot include:

- Being overweight
- Hormone therapy
- Cigarette smoking
- Being over the age of 40
- Dehydration

WHY ARE BLOOD CLOTS SO DANGEROUS?

Deep Vein Thrombosis that blocks the flow of blood in a vein can cause swelling and pain in the leg. This can lead to leg tissue damage. Long term symptoms also can occur from this damage and are called post-thrombotic syndrome.

Blood clots that travel to the lung can cut off the blood supply to an artery in the heart or the lungs. This is dangerous and can occasionally cause death.

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HOW CAN I REDUCE MY RISK OF VENOUS THROMBOEMBOLISM?

- Move around as much as you can as soon as you can
- Do leg exercises in bed
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Quit smoking cigarettes
- Wear compression stockings (if prescribed)
- Take your blood clot prevention medication as ordered by your doctor

REDUCING YOUR RISK OF VENOUS THROMBOEMBOLISM WHILE YOU'RE IN THE HOSPITAL

In hospitals, there are two ways to reduce your risk of getting blood clots: anticoagulants and mechanical devices.

ANTICOAGULANTS

In medical terms, clotting is referred to as coagulation. The drugs used to prevent a clot are called anticoagulants. Using anticoagulants is the most effective way of preventing Venous Thromboembolism.

You know these drugs as blood thinners. But they do not actually thin the blood; they slow the body's ability to form a clot. Anticoagulants can cause you to bruise and bleed more easily.

Anticoagulants are usually given through an injection into the fatty part of your abdomen one to two times a day. Generally, they are used until you are discharged from the hospital. You may be asked to continue the anticoagulant injections at home.

MECHANICAL DEVICES

GRADUATED COMPRESSION STOCKINGS (GCS)

These are tight stockings that squeeze your lower legs. They help keep the blood flowing through the veins in your legs. Your legs will be measured to fit the stockings properly. Wear them all the time, except when washing or showering until you return to your normal level of daily activity. Let your doctor or nurse know if your skin changes color or if you

develop blisters or pain from the stockings. And make sure the stockings don't roll down to the space behind your kneecap.

SEQUENTIAL COMPRESSION DEVICES (SCD)

These are inflatable sleeves that are placed on your legs. They will squeeze your legs on and off during the day. Take them off before you get out of bed because they can cause you to trip and fall. Be sure to ask for the sleeves to be put back on.

VENA CAVAL FILTER

If your risk of Venous Thromboembolism is high but you cannot take anticoagulant drugs and are not able to use the compression stockings or compression device, you may be offered a temporary vena caval filter. This is an umbrella shaped device that is inserted into a large vein to trap any blood clots and stop them from moving toward the lungs. They are used rarely.

PLEASE NOTE:

- How long should I keep using the anticoagulant drug?
- What should I do if I can't give myself the shot?
- If you have any questions about the drugs used to prevent a clot, please ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.
- If you were given graduated compression stockings, they should be worn until you return to your usual level of activity.
- If you develop any symptoms of possible Deep Vein Thrombosis or Pulmonary Embolus at home in the days and weeks after hospitalization, then seek medical advice immediately, either from your doctor or your nearest hospital emergency department.

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