

Area physician offers effective treatment for varicose veins

By Shelly Webb

Although varicose veins are very common they can cause serious health problems for many people. Not only are they unattractive but the throbbing pain and discomfort can become an ongoing issue.

Varicose veins occur when veins, primarily in the legs, become enlarged. They are normally a dark blue or purple color and in some cases they become so enlarged they appear like large cords pushing their way through the skin.

Dr. Larry Stern, medical director of the Vein Specialty Center in Wooster, said the good news regarding varicose veins, whether small spider veins or large, twisted, bulging veins, is that effective treatments do exist.

“Effective treatments are available for veins of all sizes,” Stern explained. “Fortunately, treatments today are all minimally invasive and can normally be performed on an outpatient basis in the doctor’s office.”

According to Stern, the veins in the legs are actually designed to transport blood upward toward the heart. To accomplish this process, and to counteract the effects of gravity, some of these veins contain valves that allow the blood to flow only in an upward direction.

“In some individuals, however, these valves become dysfunctional,” Stern said. “This can result in inefficient blood flow, increased pressure, and the development of tenderness, enlarged veins, and even swelling.”

There are cases in which more serious conditions, such as thrombophlebitis, may occur as a result of varicose veins. Thrombophlebitis happens when blood clots form within veins that are inflamed. Stern said that in severe cases, individuals can develop profound skin changes, irreversible pigmentation, and even ulcerations in the lower legs.

The key is to treat these veins before the damage escalates to a more serious condition. Approximately 20 percent of adults develop varicose veins, and women are four times more likely than men to develop the condition. People with a family history of varicose veins are at a greater risk of developing the problem.

“Other risk factors include pregnancy, obesity, occupations that require prolonged standing, and a history of blood clots in the legs,” Stern added. “Varicose veins usually appear between the ages of 30 and 60, and they tend to worsen over time. Simple lifestyle

modifications may improve the symptoms of varicose veins. Leg elevation while resting is beneficial because it reduces venous pressure. Compression stockings can also assist in the ascent of blood toward the heart, and are recommended for use from morning until bedtime each day. Exercise is beneficial because the contracting muscles in the foot and calf serve as a pump and enhance the flow of blood back to the heart. Weight-control measures and, of course, over-the-counter analgesics and anti-inflammatory medications can help minimize the pain and discomfort associated with varicose veins.”

To diagnose the problem, a venous ultrasound is normally performed. This is a non-invasive procedure that allows a visual of the veins in the legs to determine whether blood clots are present and to evaluate the overall situation. Stern said the findings of the ultrasound usually dictate the treatment to follow.

“The most common abnormality identified in patients with varicose veins is valvular dysfunction, also called incompetence,” he said. “Once the venous valves become incompetent, they generally do not improve or repair themselves and there is no effective medical treatment to repair the valves. As a result, these dysfunctional veins must be eliminated in order to restore normal function to the venous system. Fortunately, there is a great deal of redundancy in the venous system, and veins can be removed without any bad consequences.”

Stern said that in the past, patients with damaged valves underwent vein stripping procedures, where long segments of veins were physically removed from the leg through sizable incisions which were painful and aesthetically unattractive. A newer technique, called endovenous laser ablation, allows for the placement of a thin laser fiber into the diseased vein through a small needle, allowing the delivery of laser energy to the vein from the inside to seal it shut and eliminate blood flow. The ablation procedure requires no incisions, and results in a rapid recovery with very little discomfort. The procedure can be performed in the office setting under local anesthesia, and the success rate is more than 95 percent.

“Often, endovenous laser ablation is sufficient to treat large, twisted, bulging veins on the leg,” Stern said. “In some cases, however, an associated procedure, called microphlebectomy, is also necessary. In these cases, a special hook is used to remove the veins through tiny incisions that do not require stitches and leave no scars. These procedures are typically covered by commercial insurers when deemed medically necessary and performed for symptomatic venous disease.”

In cases where the venous ultrasound is normal and reveals no dysfunction in the valves, there are other treatment options available to address the visible symptoms. For example, surface veins of varying sizes, including spider veins, can be treated with injection sclerotherapy, a technique in which a tiny needle is used to inject a special solution into the

vein, causing it to collapse and disappear. The procedure is performed in the doctor's office, causes only minimal discomfort, and allows for immediate return to normal activities. Another technique known as thermocoagulation can be used to deliver tiny bursts of thermal energy to spider veins, causing them to disappear. In addition, laser energy can be applied to the skin surface to eliminate spider veins.

The best news where varicose veins are concerned is that several treatment options exist today and many are covered by insurance. If you are tired of dealing with unsightly and painful veins it may be worth the time to schedule a consultation.

Published: July 6, 2010