

# What You Should Know About Deep Vein Thrombosis

**D**eeep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a serious condition that can cause disability or even death. It happens when a blood clot forms in the deep veins of the legs or arms, away from the skin's surface. When the clot occurs, blood flow slows down and causes swelling. If a piece of the clot breaks off, it may travel to the lungs, causing pulmonary embolism (PE).

## What are the symptoms of DVT?

The symptoms of swelling, pain, tenderness, or redness of the skin may indicate DVT; however, you may have no symptoms at all. The symptoms of PE include difficulty breathing, chest pain or discomfort that worsens with a deep breath or coughing, coughing up blood, lightheadedness, fainting, or rapid heart rate. If you have any of these symptoms, seek medical help immediately.

## How is DVT diagnosed?

A number of tests may help your clinician know if you have DVT. Among those are blood tests to screen for disorders that increase the risk for DVT; ultrasound or MRI of the legs; and venogram, where dye is put into a vein and then an x-ray is taken of it. If PE is suspected, scans of the lungs may be performed.

## How is DVT treated?

Medications to dissolve and prevent blood clots, called anticoagulants, may be prescribed. Elastic stockings are sometimes worn to relieve pain and prevent DVT.

## Who is at risk for DVT?

Anyone may have DVT, but the risk is greater if you have more than one of the following factors: hospitalization; recent surgery or injury; slow blood flow due to limited movement or leg crossing; clotting disorder, previous DVT, or family history of it; increasing age; cancer or its treatment; pregnancy; increased estrogen (through birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy); obesity; smoking; and heart, lung, or inflammatory bowel disease.

## How can I prevent DVT?

In general, exercise regularly, maintain a healthy weight, and don't smoke. Move around as soon as



possible when confined to bed during illness or hospitalization. When sitting for long periods, such as when traveling, walk and stretch at regular intervals; wear loose-fitting clothes; drink plenty of water; and limit alcohol and caffeine intake. Discuss prevention measures with your clinician when you are pregnant or having surgery.

Patient education pamphlets with more information are available online:

- *American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*  
[www.acog.org/publications/patient\\_education/bp174.cfm](http://www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp174.cfm)
- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*  
[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dvt/facts.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dvt/facts.html)