

SPOTLIGHT ON... *Varicose Veins*

From restless legs to eczema, we take a look at this common health problem

Often painful and very unsightly, varicose veins can have a large impact on our health and on our self-confidence. But what are they exactly and how do we treat them properly? We spoke to Professor Austin Leahy, Consultant Vascular Surgeon at the Beacon Hospital in Dublin and the Director of Vein Clinics of Ireland to find out more.

"Varicose veins are swollen, tortuous veins – they're the large, ugly, swollen veins that you sometimes see on people's legs. They are caused by abnormal valves which can develop weakness in the veins of the leg," says Professor Leahy.

While the veins can be genetically passed down from parent to child, Professor Leahy says that obesity is also a pre-disposing factor amongst other things.

"Other things that pre-dispose to them are obesity, it seems like everything in health now is caused by obesity, then there's being Caucasian, actually, is a definite connection. As well as that there are other diseases of the vein, for example, deep vein thrombosis, that predispose varicose veins. So there are many different reasons why we get them, but they are very common."

The symptoms of varicose veins can be very vague and hard to pin down.

"Most people would think that severe pain or acute pain in the leg is a symptom of varicose veins but it almost never is. If you have acute pain in your leg in association with varicose veins that would be because the varicose veins are inflamed and that's quite a rare condition," says Professor Leahy.

"Actually most people who present with symptoms of varicose veins have very vague pain in their legs and it's the sort of pain you get in your legs after you've been shopping or on your feet all day.

"You get an ache in your legs. The other symptoms are vague, like

itching due to skin problems such as eczema or restless leg syndrome – sort of a pain that wakes you up in the night, a crampy pain."

If you have varicose veins, it's essential not to ignore them.

"The problem is this, they are not something that can be ignored because varicose veins cause skin changes at the ankle due to continuous pressure in the veins. People initially develop dry, scaly skin, what we doctors call eczema. So they feel itchy, they start to scratch their legs. Gradually that can progress and they begin to get swelling at their ankles, they begin to get pigmentation or discolouration at their ankles and finally, in older people, they can unfortunately develop venous ulceration," says Professor Leahy.

"So in other words, the message is varicose veins don't cause that much [trouble] initially but in fact they're a smouldering problem that needs to be dealt with or else something more sinister and more serious can evolve."

While Professor Leahy advises to see your doctor sooner rather than later, he says that he treats people from all age groups from those who want treatment for cosmetic reasons to those who have varicose veins and skin issues associated with them.

"I liken it to the troublesome tyre that you get mended before it blows out. It's better to get the thing mended as soon as possible. Now previously people used to say wait until you've had all your babies, but nowadays varicose vein treatment has got so much easier that makes absolutely no sense."

The treatment of choice for varicose veins is now thermal ablation which is done with a laser.

"What happens is through a tiny hole in the skin, we pass a tube up along the vein being shown to be incompetent, that have damaged valves, and we destroy the vein. We

now have a treatment that's walk in, walk out, day case treatment and it's the number one [method of] treatment," says Professor Leahy.

The treatment involves beginning with an ultrasound.

"The first step in getting treatment for varicose veins is to get a duplex ultrasound scan of the legs done and to see a vascular surgeon. At Vein Clinics of Ireland, we arrange a scan on the first appointment and I see the person immediately afterwards, so within an hour they're sorted out. We know the extent of the problem and we also know what the treatment needed would be and we can work out a plan with the treatment," says Professor Leahy.

"About 25 per cent of patients who present with ugly, broken veins on their skin do not require surgery as such. They can be treated with injection sclerotherapy.

"Injection sclerotherapy is where you inject a chemical directly into the vein which is broken and ugly and that destroys it."

And if you decide to have treatment, can your varicose veins ever return? Unfortunately the answer is yes.

"Any veins that are treated with laser will be dealt with, however people can always develop further veins. But with this modern treatment it would be less than one in ten. This has been proven to be as good as cutting and stripping," says Professor Leahy.

"The one reason that one would get recurrence particularly is if you get overweight. So once again, provided you don't get overweight after this operation you are very unlikely to require a further operation. That being said, as we get older, we do tend to get more broken veins in our skin. We call those skin flares and those unfortunately can develop throughout life. But the good news is that they can be treated by injection sclerotherapy and occasionally laser sclerotherapy which is just a walk in, walk out treatment." **WW**

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