



NEW YEAR, NEW LEGS

by Austin Leahy, Consultant Vascular Surgeon

Traditionally, there is an increase in referrals for varicose vein treatment in the early months of the year, as patients finally decide to do something about those ugly varicose veins. While patients are often concerned about their appearance, vascular surgeons are concerned about preventing skin changes from venous hypertension.

In neglected varicose vein disease eczema, haemosiderin pigmentation and lipodermatosclerosis can lead to venous ulceration, particularly in the elderly. Pain, itching, bleeding and restless leg syndrome are other reasons why patients seek referral.

At Beacon Hospital all new referrals are first assessed carefully by duplex ultrasound scanning performed by specialised vascular technicians.

Injection Sclerotherapy

About 25% of patients present with telangiectasia or reticular veins which are totally confined to the skin and subcutaneous tissues. Provided a duplex ultrasound scan has ruled out underlying significant varicosities of the Great or Short Saphenous systems, these can be adequately treated by injection sclerotherapy alone. So, up to a quarter of referred patients can be managed by an outpatient ambulatory treatment, with good results and, provided this is done for more than cosmetic reasons, it is covered by Health Insurance.

Endovenous Laser Treatment

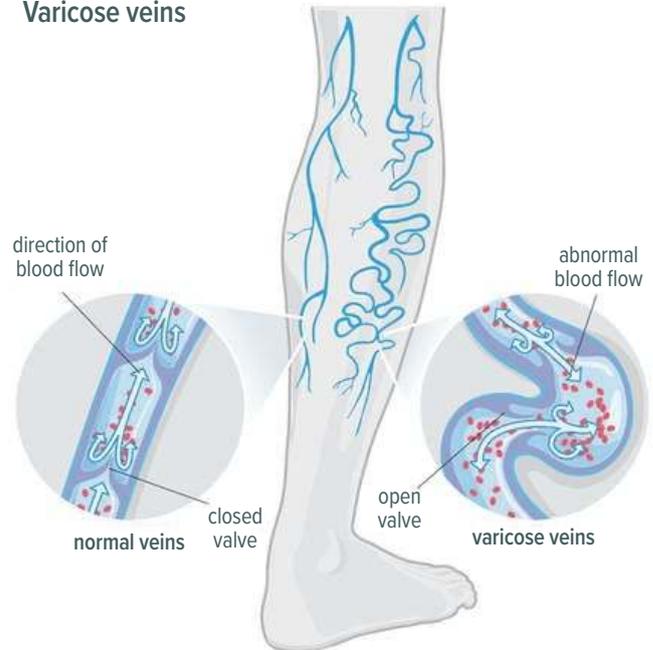
In patients presenting with major superficial venous incompetence, minimally invasive surgery is now the treatment of choice, and open surgery including stripping is no longer necessary (NICE Guidelines, 2016). Laser surgery was introduced in 1991 by Dr Min in New York. It is as effective as open surgery, much less painful and allows patients to return to full activities, usually within a few days.

A laser or radiofrequency probe is passed up the incompetent saphenous veins, obliterating them. This can be accompanied by phlebectomy, which removes the accompanying ugly varicosities through tiny incisions. Many patients will opt to follow this up with injection sclerotherapy for a complete result. Again these treatments are all covered by insurance.

Deep Venous Reflux / Elastic Stockings

A small number of patients present with varicosities and are shown to have deep reflux on duplex scanning. This group of patients require elastic stockings to the knee in the long-term if they are to avoid the consequences of venous hypertension. They should also consider

Varicose veins



anti-coagulant prophylaxis, especially when flying for more than 4 hours. Apart from that small group of patients, long-term elastic stockings have not been found to be effective in varicose vein patients and are not used (NICE Guidelines, 2016).

Venous Ulceration

In addition to assessing the venous system with duplex ultrasound scanning, patients with leg ulceration which has failed to heal in three months should have Doppler ankle and toe pressures measured. This will establish if pressure dressings, which form the mainstay of ulcer treatment, are necessary and safe.

If accompanying varicose veins are present, they should be treated by endovenous laser treatment. This speeds up healing and reduces recurrence. Even in patients on full anti-coagulation, laser ablation can be quite safely carried out.

Delaying Treatment?

Historically, open surgery was delayed until patients had had their families, or until varicose veins had disimproved. Modern assessment by duplex ultrasound allows targeted treatment of incompetent veins, with surgery being tailored to patients' requirements.

Minimally invasive surgery is a much more attractive treatment to patients and can be done on a walk-in, walk-out basis.

Beacon Hospital's Vascular Department is comprised of our Vascular Diagnostics Unit and our Surgical Vascular Services. Our Team includes our Chief Vascular Physiologist and 5 Consultant Vascular Surgeons backed by the full services of Beacon Hospital. We are now offering a Direct Access Vascular Diagnostics Unit where GPs can refer their patients in directly for non invasive ultrasonic vascular imaging.

To make an appointment, or if you have any queries, please call: (01) 293 2694.