



Varicose veins and spider veins

Varicose veins are twisted veins that can be blue, red, or skin-colored. They may appear rope-like and make the skin bulge out. Varicose veins are often on the thighs, the backs and fronts of the calves, or the inside of the legs near the ankles and feet.

Spider veins are smaller than varicose veins. They are usually red and may look like tree branches or spider webs. Spider veins can usually be seen under the skin, but they do not make the skin bulge out like varicose veins do. Spider veins are usually found on the legs or the face.

Some women do not have any symptoms with varicose veins and spider veins. If you do have symptoms, your legs may feel extremely tired, heavy, or achy.

Q: What causes varicose veins and spider veins?

A: Your heart pumps blood filled with oxygen and nutrients through your arteries to your whole body. Veins then carry the blood from different parts of your body back to your heart. Normally, your veins have valves that act as one-way flaps. But if the valves don't close correctly, blood can leak back into the lower part of the vein rather than going toward the heart. Over time, more blood gets stuck in the vein, building pressure that weakens the walls of the vein. This causes the vein to grow larger.

Q: Are some women more at risk of varicose veins and spider veins?

A: Yes. Your risk of varicose veins and spider veins may be higher if you:

- **Have a family or personal history of varicose veins or spider veins.** In one small study, more than half of women with varicose veins had a parent with varicose veins too.

- **Sit or stand for long periods.** Sitting or standing for a long time, especially for more than 4 hours at a time, may make your veins work harder against gravity to pump blood to your heart.
- **Have overweight or obesity.** Having overweight or obesity can put extra pressure on your veins.
- **Are pregnant.** During pregnancy, the amount of blood pumping through your body increases to support your unborn baby. The extra blood causes your veins to swell. Your growing uterus (womb) also puts pressure on your veins. Varicose veins may go away within a few months after childbirth, or they may remain and continue to cause symptoms.
- **Are older.** As you get older, the valves in your veins may weaken and not work as well. Your calf muscles also weaken as you age. Your calf muscles normally help squeeze veins and send blood back toward the heart as you walk.
- **Use hormonal birth control or menopausal hormone therapy.** The hormone estrogen may weaken vein valves and lead to varicose veins. Using hormonal birth control or taking menopausal hormone therapy may raise your risk of varicose or spider veins.
- **Have a condition that damaged the valves.** Blood clots in the legs or scarring of the veins can damage the valves.

Q: How are varicose veins and spider veins treated?

A: If your symptoms are mild, your doctor or nurse may suggest steps to take at home, such as getting regular physical activity or losing weight if you have overweight or obesity. Your doctor or nurse may also suggest compression stockings to wear daily and remove at night to make blood flow in your legs better. These steps may help prevent new varicose veins and spider veins from forming. These steps may also help you manage symptoms of existing varicose veins and spider veins.

If compression stockings do not work or if you have pain or other symptoms that bother you, your doctor or nurse may talk to you about non-surgical procedures to treat varicose veins and spider veins. These procedures can permanently close off the vein. Medicine can also help treat the symptoms of varicose veins, including swelling, pain, and itching.

If you have very large or severe varicose veins, you may need surgery. Surgery permanently removes the vein.

For more information...

For more information about varicose veins and spider veins, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute,
NIH, HHS**
301-592-8573 • [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/
varicose-veins](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/varicose-veins)

American Academy of Dermatology
1-866-503-7546 • www.aad.org

American Society for Dermatologic Surgery
847-956-0900 • www.asds.net

Society of Interventional Radiology
703-691-1805 • www.sirweb.org

American College of Phlebology
510-346-6800 • www.phlebology.org

American Venous Forum
414-918-9880 • www.veinforum.org

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