

What is Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)?

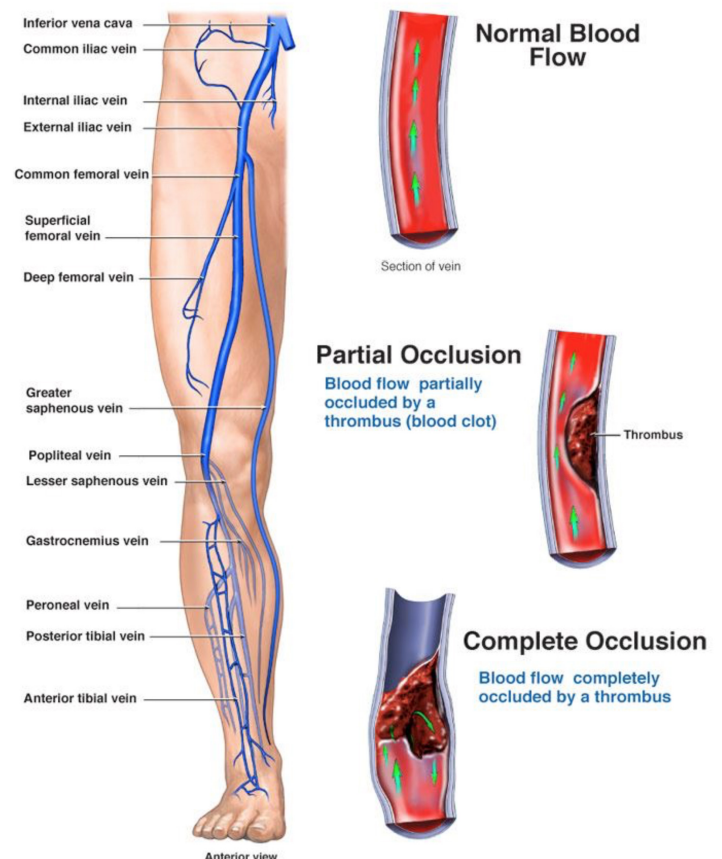
Deep vein thrombosis, commonly referred to as “DVT,” occurs when a blood clot or thrombus, develops in the large veins of the legs or pelvic area. Some DVTs may cause no pain, whereas others can be quite painful. With prompt diagnosis and treatment, the majority of DVT’s are not life threatening. However, a blood clot that forms in the deep veins can be life threatening. A clot that forms in the large, deep veins is more likely to break free and travel through the vein. It is then called an embolus. When an embolus travels from the legs or pelvic areas and lodges in a lung artery, the condition is known as a “pulmonary embolism,” or PE, a potentially fatal condition if not immediately diagnosed and treated.

Symptoms

Approximately one-half of those with a DVT never have recognizable symptoms. The most common symptom is leg pain and tenderness in the calf muscles. One may also observe swelling or a change in color of one leg to purple or blue. These signs and symptoms may appear suddenly or may steadily develop over a short period of time.

Most common Signs and Symptoms of DVT

- Sudden swelling of one limb
- Pain or tenderness
- Skin that is warm to the touch
- Fullness of the veins just beneath the skin
- Change in color (blue, red, or very pale)



Diagnosis

DVT is diagnosed by an ultrasound exam. This simple, painless test is safe and widely available.

Causes

DVT is generally caused by a combination of two or three underlying conditions:

- Slow or sluggish blood flow through a deep vein
- Tendency for a person's blood to clot quickly
- Irritation, inflammation, or injury to the inner lining of the vein

There are a variety of settings in which this abnormal clotting process can occur. These include individuals on bed rest (such as during or after a surgical procedure or medical illness, such as heart attack or stroke) or those who are confined and unable to walk for prolonged periods of time (such as during prolonged air or car travel). It can occur in certain families where there is a history of parents or siblings who have suffered from prior blood clots. It can also occur in individuals with active cancer or those undergoing cancer treatment which may predispose the blood to clotting.

Having a recent major surgical procedure, especially hip and knee orthopedic surgeries or one that requires prolonged bed rest, predispose the blood to clotting. Irritation or inflammation occurs when a leg vein is injured by a major accident or medical procedure.

Also, there are specific medical conditions that may increase your risk of developing a DVT via these three mechanisms, such as congestive heart failure, severe obesity, chronic respiratory failure, a history of smoking, varicose veins, pregnancy, and estrogen treatment. If you are concerned that you may be at risk, please consult with your health care provider.

Treatment

Both DVT and PE are treated with blood thinning medication. These medicines, called anticoagulants (Xarelto, Eliquis, Coumadin), decrease your blood's ability to clot and can also stop clots from getting bigger. The use of medication may also prevent new clots from forming. They do not, however, break up existing clots that have already formed. The body's natural systems will help dissolve the clot to varying degrees.

Sometimes patients with DVT are also asked to wear a prescription stocking to help treat the symptoms of swelling and prevent skin changes that can occur over time from the damage to the vein from the DVT. Skin changes can include dermatitis, skin discoloration, scarring and ulcers. This condition is called "post-thrombotic syndrome." Stocking and devices that use air pressure to inflate long leg cuffs are also used for the prevention of DVT.

Some Tips to Avoid DVT

- Do not sit for long periods of time
- Elevate legs if you are sitting for moderate periods of time
- If you are on an airplane for more than four hours-get up and walk in the aisles, pump your feet up and down
- If you are flying, drink plenty of non-alcoholic beverages
- Keep hydrated: drink six glasses of water a day
- Talk to your doctor about the need for medications or graduated elastic compression stockings for long airplane flights

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