

Maintaining Healthy Veins

by Paul Barney, M.D.

More than 40 million Americans have varicose veins, a term in Latin meaning "twisted and swollen blood vessel." Although the condition is rarely disabling, it is disfiguring, causing discomfort and embarrassment to those afflicted.

In many cases, genetic predisposition and gender determine who will develop varicose veins. A full 75% of Americans with the condition are women. At risk are women who may experience the ginning of this condition during pregnancy as the enlarging womb presses the veins in the abdomen, increasing pressure in the veins of the legs. Age is another factor as the skin becomes less elastic, lessening vein support. Some individuals are genetically predisposed to a malfunction of the one-way valves that may cause a backflow of blood to pool in superficial veins, stretching and swelling them.

Some health care professionals believe that our Western diet, high in refined carbohydrates and fat and low in fiber, may cause straining during bowel movement leading to hemorrhoids (anal varicose veins) and increase pressure in the leg veins. Our Western diet also leads to obesity and cardiovascular conditions such as plaque deposits in the arteries, abnormal clotting and platelet aggregation, cardiac dysfunction or fail-

ure, all leading to a weakened venous system that could increase the chance of developing varicose veins and edema (swelling in the legs). Those who are predisposed to varicose veins and who stand for long periods of time, especially on hard floors, may develop them more quickly.

If you are at risk of developing this condition as you age, emphasizing a diet high in fiber, legumes and grains, fresh fruits and vegetables will improve your chances of maintaining good vein health. Other nutritional supplements that may be beneficial are horse chestnut seeds, Centella Asiatica, Milk Thistle, Butcher's Broom and bioflavonoids.

Horse chestnut seeds have a long historical use in the treatment of varicose veins and hemorrhoids. One active ingredient that has been researched is a saponin mixture called Aescin. In a recent study, Aescin was as effective as compression stockings in reducing leg swelling in patients with chronic venous insufficiency.

Centella Asiatica is a common edible herb also known as Gotu Kola in India. When grown in Madagascar, it has a higher content of a compound called triterpenic fraction (TTFCA) than the same herb has when grown in other parts of the world. This compound has been used for many years in the treatment of venous hypertension. In a study conducted in 1989, 120mg dosage was safely used in patients with poor venous blood flow and it improved the condition after one or two months.

Often, inflammation is a component of varicose veins. Milk Thistle, another herb commonly used for the treatment of liver disorders, was also found to reduce inflammation and edema in a recent Spanish study.

A bushy evergreen perennial found throughout much of the Western world is Butcher's Broom. Its saponin glycosides are anti-inflammatory and help contract blood vessels, especially veins thus making it an important component of any natural formulation used to improve venous conditions.

Certain bioflavonoids, such as quercetin and rutin, have also been shown to be useful in the natural treatment of varicose veins as a strengthening of capillary and vein walls.

There are other nutritional supplements including vitamins and minerals that may help maintain vein health as we age. They are listed in my new book "A Doctor's Guide to Natural Medicine." To improve vein health and to decrease your chance of developing varicose veins: do not stand for long periods of time especially on hard surfaces such as concrete. If you can't avoid this, make sure your shoes are well cushioned. If you are sitting for long periods of time either working or traveling, take walking breaks. Stop crossing your legs and exercise regularly to incorporate rhythmic contraction of the leg muscles. Rest with your legs elevated when taking a break. Wearing good support hose and avoiding tight knee-highs will promote good blood flow.

These things can be very important if you are genetically predisposed to varicose veins. Starting nutrients early may help diminish or delay venous problems.

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