

# Relieving the pain of varicose veins

Tue, Jul 24, 2012

Varicose veins affect 20 per cent of people in the western world but new procedures have replaced the old painful “stripping” operation, so they are easier to treat, writes **MICHELLE MCDONAGH**

IF YOU suffer from varicose veins, you can count yourself as a member of a very large club. One in five people face a daily struggle with the familiar swollen, ropey veins that can cause throbbing pain, severe swelling and heavy, tired legs.

Varicose veins are caused by a condition known as venous insufficiency or venous reflux in which blood circulating through the lower limbs does not properly return to the heart, but instead pools up in the distended legs.

If your parents or siblings have had varicose veins, you're more likely to develop them - as heredity is a major factor in venous reflux disease. People who are obese and women who have had multiple pregnancies are particularly susceptible as the extra weight puts extra strain on the veins. Women are more vulnerable to the problem than men, partly because the hormonal changes brought on by menstruation, menopause and hormone-based drug therapy can relax vein walls and cause venous reflux.

Lifestyle and particularly physical activity can also affect your odds of developing varicose veins. People whose careers require them to stand in place for long periods of time – nurses, teachers, waitresses, flight attendants and other service personnel, for example – have a higher-than-average risk of venous disease as do people who do a lot of heavy lifting.

Symptoms of venous reflux disease can include pain and fatigue in the legs, swollen ankles and calves, burning or itching skin, skin discoloration and leg ulcers. In less severe cases, thin, discoloured vessels – spider veins – may be the only symptom. About 4,000 varicose vein operations are carried out annually in Ireland. One in 200 Irish people will suffer the devastating, painful and socially isolating complication of a varicose leg ulcer.

Although many people do not experience problems until they are older, venous reflux disease can occur in teenagers and is a progressive disease that worsens without treatment. Since valves cannot be repaired, the only alternative is to re-route blood flow through healthy veins.

Traditionally, this has been done by surgically removing or “stripping” the troublesome vein from the leg. During a stripping procedure, which is usually performed under general anaesthetic, the surgeon makes an incision in the patient's groin and ties off the main vein, after which a stripper tool is threaded through the vein and used to pull the vein out of the leg through a second incision just above the calf.

However, a new, cutting-edge, minimally-invasive procedure now available in Ireland, VNUS Closure, uses ultrasound to close off diseased veins and allows patients to get back on their feet much quicker than traditional treatments. The “walk-in, walk-out” procedure, which is covered for the treatment of varicose veins by all of the insurance companies in the Irish market and is available at a number of hospitals around the country (see [vnus.ie](http://vnus.ie) for more details), involves little or no pain and minimal scarring.

A thin catheter is inserted into the vein through a small opening to deliver radio-frequency energy to the vein wall, causing it to heat, collapse, and seal shut. The vein simply becomes fibrous tissue after treatment and, over time, will gradually incorporate into the surrounding tissue.

Prof Austin Leahy, general and vascular surgeon at the Bon Secours Hospital in Dublin, treats two main categories of varicose vein patients – younger people in their 20s and 30s who are concerned about the cosmetic appearance of their legs and people over 50 who are suffering from varicose vein disability such as skin rashes, cellulites and leg ulcers.

“We no longer need to cut, strip or sew varicose veins and patients no longer need a general anaesthetic. The procedure can all be performed under local anaesthetic on a walk-in, walkout basis using VNUS Closure. There are no stitches involved and the pain is minimal,” he explains.