

Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a condition in which a blood clot (thrombus) forms in a deep vein in the body. The blood clot can partially or totally block blood flow in the vein. Deep vein thrombosis occurs most often in the leg veins. The blood clot can break off and travel to the lungs, resulting in a pulmonary embolus, which can be life-threatening.

If you have questions or concerns about DVT, please ask your doctor or nurse.

Risk Factors

Risk factors for DVT include:

- Immobility, such as long car or airplane trips.
- Recent surgery.
- Stroke.
- Trauma.
- Pregnancy.
- Estrogen (birth control or hormone replacement therapy).
- Coagulation disorders (tendency for the blood to clot).
- Cancer.
- Over 60 years of age.
- History of DVT or pulmonary embolus.
- Obesity.
- Heart failure.

A hospital stay with a decrease in activity increases your DVT risk.

Symptoms

The symptoms depend on the size and location of the blood clot and can include:

- Leg or arm pain or discomfort.
- Sudden swelling in one leg or arm.
- Change in skin color of leg or arm (bluish or reddish color).

In some cases, DVT may not cause any symptoms.

Prevention

Hospital

In the hospital, all patients are at risk for DVT. Steps will be taken to help prevent blood clots from forming. These may include:

- Low-dose “blood-thinning” medicines (prophylaxis).
- DVT Prevention Boots.

DVT Prevention Boots gently squeeze your calves to promote blood flow to the heart.

Treatment

Medicines

Anticoagulants or “blood thinners,” may be used to prevent:

- An existing blood clot from getting larger.
- New blood clots from forming.

This medicine does not dissolve blood clots that already have formed.

The blood thinners may be given by:

- IV (into the vein) line.
- Injection into the skin.
- Mouth (orally).

At first, blood thinners are often given in 2 forms. They are given IV or by injection, along with the oral medicine warfarin. Then, warfarin may be given alone. In some cases, you may be on warfarin along with injections at the same time.

Your doctor will use blood tests to select the correct dose of medicine. These blood tests are called the international normalized ratio (INR) or prothrombin time (PT).

Your doctor will decide how long you will need to take blood thinners. In rare cases, a thrombolytic medicine may be used to dissolve the blood clot.

Surgery

When a blood thinner cannot be used, a filter may be placed in the vena cava (the large vein in the abdomen). The filter prevents blood clots from traveling to your lung.

Other Treatment

Leg Elevation

- Elevate the affected arm or leg above the level of the heart.

Bed Rest

Bed rest may be ordered depending on the location of the blood clot in your body.

At Home

- Know the risk factors and signs of DVT. If you are at risk for DVT, talk with your doctor. “Blood thinning medicines” or compression stockings may be used in high-risk patients or those having certain types of medical procedures or surgery.
- Be aware that if elastic stockings are not worn correctly (i.e., rolled or wrong size) they can impair blood flow.
- Avoid prolonged sitting. It is helpful to stand up and walk at least every hour.
- Get regular exercise (a few minutes every hour) on long car or airplane rides. Exercise both feet while lying, sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Stop any medications (e.g., estrogen) that contribute to blood clotting as directed by your doctor. This is important before any surgery.
- Avoid tight clothing that can restrict blood flow.

When to Notify Your Doctor or Nurse

Report any sudden onset of swelling of the leg or arm or any other DVT symptoms.

Seek medical attention right away if you have:

- Chest pain or discomfort.
- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing.
- Cough, sudden onset of bloody sputum.
- Rapid heart rate.
- Fainting.
- Sudden, unexplained pain, redness or swelling of an extremity.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar a el departamento de representantes para pacientes al 312-926-3112.

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Developed by: Surgical Nursing and the Division of Vascular Surgery with the Center for Vascular Disease

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