

# **VARICOSE VEIN DISEASE – VISIBLE OR NOT, IT CAN AFFECT YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE**

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For many people, the often large, ropey-looking veins bulging from their legs are enough to keep them from wearing shorts or skirts. Most people consider them just plain unsightly but the truth is that they are indications that there may be something more serious going on that should be evaluated and treated. The underlying condition, lower extremity venous reflux disease or “varicose vein disease,” is a common medical condition that affects up to 50% of the adult population. Women are affected one and a half times more frequently than men. Once you have varicose veins, they often worsen as you become older. If either of your parents had varicose veins, you are more likely to have them yourself.

Symptoms include leg aches, fatigue, discomfort, swelling, itching, burning and cramps. You may see small spider veins and/or the more dramatically enlarged and bulging varicose veins. Many people have symptoms without anything visible, but no matter what your symptoms are, your quality of life is probably affected. You don’t participate in the activities you love; you don’t wear the clothes you like; you may have two sets of shoes so that you have one pair for morning and another pair for the afternoon when your feet are swollen. You probably can’t stand on your feet all day like you used to. Aching in your legs may interrupt your sleep, making you feel tired and sluggish throughout the day.

## Understanding Our Anatomy

Circulation is the process by which blood flows away from the heart to the rest of the body and then back to the heart again. We have two types of blood vessels: arteries that carry blood away from the heart and veins which return blood to the heart. Superficial veins lie just below the skin and deep veins lie within the muscles of our legs.

Veins and arteries vary greatly. Arteries are under more pressure. (Blood pressure of 120 mmHg is normal arterial pressure. The blood pressure of a vein in the same location might vary from 6-15 mmHg.) Because veins have such little assistance from the heart, they compensate by having one-way valves that help the blood constantly move in one direction. The veins also rely a great deal on the movement of our leg muscles squeezing the veins and thus pushing the blood along. (That’s why leg swelling is often worse at the end of the day after sitting or standing for an extended time. The leg muscles when we walk actually pump the blood in the veins back to the heart.)

In a damaged vein, the valves no longer work and the vein walls become weak and dilated. This allows the blood to leak backwards through the valve. Over time, blood pools in the veins and varicose veins may result. What starts as merely unsightly can turn dangerous if swelling and blood clots form where blood moves too slowly.

## Diagnosis

As we mentioned earlier, symptoms often include leg fatigue (worse at the end of a day), swelling, itching and cramping (often during the night.) Many people have a combination of these symptoms without having the obvious visible signs of varicose veins.

Diagnosis is based on a combination of symptoms, a physical exam and, most importantly, an ultrasound (sound wave) test of the deep and superficial veins in your legs. This is a non-invasive test that can quickly and easily be performed in the office.

## Treatment

If you are diagnosed with venous reflux disease, treatment begins with conservative measures such as increased walking every day, elevating your feet, taking over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen or Tylenol® for pain and, most importantly, wearing compression hose prescribed by your healthcare provider. Over-the-counter compression hose are good but prescription-strength compression hose are more effective at alleviating symptoms.

Some insurance companies will pay for your prescription hose. Even if they don't, almost all insurance companies will require these "conservative measures" for a set period of time before they will consider paying for any surgical treatment. Most people do find their discomfort is reduced by following conservative measures.

If you don't have significant relief of your symptoms, then surgery - outpatient, performed in a doctor's office - is often recommended. Historically, surgical treatment required a lengthy hospital stay after a "stripping" procedure where the veins in the leg causing the problems were removed. The recovery was often long and painful. Today, there are several different treatment options that can be performed with little discomfort right in the office.

The goal of surgical treatment is to obliterate the weak and non-functioning superficial vein. The damaged vein is entered much like getting an intravenous (IV) access in the hospital. Under local anesthetic, a laser or ablation fiber is placed in the vein and activated. It is slowly withdrawn from the vein over a two to four minute time period, thus completing the procedure. You walk out of the office with minimal discomfort. Follow-up occurs periodically over the next few months to ensure the vein stays closed and your symptoms improve.

After completion of your surgical treatment, most if not all of your large, bulging veins will disappear. However, you may have some residual, smaller spider veins. These veins typically do not cause symptoms but can be bothersome from a visual perspective. There are many painless cosmetic options available to reduce, if not eliminate, superficial spider veins ranging from sclerotherapy to superficial laser treatment.

## The Cost

Most insurance plans require that you attempt conservative therapy (including prescription compression hose) for three to six months before they consider covering the costs of surgery. When deemed medically necessary, most insurance companies will pay for your treatment. (If there is any question of coverage, staff can assist patients with verifying insurance benefits.) Insurance will not pay for procedures used to treat cosmetic concerns. Prices vary greatly depending on the type of treatment and size of the area treated.

In our office, we offer an initial free screening where we evaluate your symptoms to help us decide what, if any, tests may be required to confirm a diagnosis. We provide honest information and compassionate support. In addition to treating varicose veins and venous insufficiency, we have provided heart, lung and vascular surgery to northern Michigan for the past ten years. Our goal is the same whether you require heart surgery, treatment of varicose veins or even cosmetic procedures: *To do the right thing at the right time to your satisfaction.*

For more information or to schedule your *free screening*, contact us at: Great Lakes Cardiothoracic & Vascular Surgery, 2390 Mitchell Park Drive, Suite B, Petoskey, MI 49770, (231) 487-9090 or (800) NMICHMD, or see our website: [www.glcvs.com](http://www.glcvs.com).

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