

VTE: What Are the Risks?

What is VTE?

Venous thromboembolism, or VTE, happens when a blood clot forms in a large vein deep in your body. This clot is called a deep venous thrombosis. It usually happens in the leg, causing pain, swelling, and redness. If the blood clot forms in your lungs, or if part of a blood clot in your leg breaks free and travels to your lungs, it is called a pulmonary embolism.

How is VTE treated?

Your doctor can give you medicine to treat the blood clot. The medicine helps stop the clot from getting bigger and keeps new clots from forming. The clot will go away on its own after three to six months.

What are the risks of VTE?

A large blood clot in your lungs can be fatal. A blood clot may also damage the veins in your legs. Symptoms of vein damage include pain, veins that are more noticeable than usual, skin color changes, and leg swelling.

The medicines that treat blood clots can increase the chance of bleeding problems. Most people still need to take the medicine. Your doctor can help you prevent bleeding problems and decide how long you need to take the medicine.

How can I prevent bleeding problems?

Your doctor will check your blood and adjust how much medicine you take. Other medicines you are taking and what you eat can affect your treatment. For example, vitamin K, which is found in many green leafy vegetables, may make the treatment less effective. Your doctor can tell you what to avoid.

How can I prevent VTE?

You can do the following to help prevent a blood clot from forming:

- Avoid long periods of inactivity while on a long trip, during an illness, or after surgery.
- Walk around every two hours. Exercise your legs while sitting by raising and lowering your toes, then repeating with your heels.
- If you smoke, you should quit because it damages blood vessels and can increase the risk of a blood clot.
- Tell your doctor if you have had a blood clot before you start a new medicine. Certain medicines, like birth control pills or hormones, can increase your risk of a blood clot.

If you have had a blood clot caused by recent surgery, hospitalization, trauma, wearing a cast, long travel, pregnancy, or taking certain

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medicines, you are not likely to get another blood clot. If no cause was found for your blood clot, you may have a higher risk of getting another one. You should talk to your doctor about your risk of having repeat blood clots.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/800.xml>
and <http://familydoctor.org/244.xml>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dvt/default.htm>

National Library of Medicine

Web site: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/deepveinthrombosis.html>
and <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/pulmonaryembolism.html>

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Notes:

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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