



Information for You from Your Health Care Team

Chronic Venous Insufficiency

What is chronic venous insufficiency?

Chronic venous insufficiency (CVI) is a disease caused by weak, worn, or damaged valves in the veins of the legs. It causes swelling of the legs and can also cause open sores especially in the ankle area.

Risk Factors:

Veins carry blood, against gravity, back towards the heart. Veins contain valves that prevent blood from flowing backward. With CVI the valves may be weak or worn making it hard for blood to move up towards the heart. Increased pressure in the veins causes the valves to stretch out, making them unable to close properly. As a result, the blood flows back into other veins and pools in the leg tissues, causing swelling and sometimes varicose veins.

CVI happens in people with previous blood clots. Obesity, inactivity, aging, and heredity can contribute to this condition.

Signs and symptoms:

Swelling and/or pain in the legs, rash, enlargement of veins close to the surface of your skin; dry, cracked, itchy skin; changes in the skin color (red or brownish color), or skin ulcers (usually in the ankle area).

Treatment:

Treatment is designed to reduce the pooling of blood and prevent ulcers. It consists of elevation and compression. Elevate your legs above your heart at set times during the day to allow pooled blood to drain (at least 30 minutes every 2 hours). At night, sleep with your feet elevated about 6 inches by propping them on a pillow.

Since leg elevation can be difficult during the day, special compression stockings may be prescribed. These stockings compress the veins close to the skin, preventing blood from pooling and helping it to return to the heart more efficiently. Proper fit is very important. The stockings are designed to provide greater pressure at the foot and ankle and less pressure higher up the leg. Put the stockings on after a period of leg elevation, usually before you get out of bed in the morning and remove them when going to bed at night.

Surgery to correct venous insufficiency is rare. Procedures are done sometimes when venous stasis ulcers don't heal.

How do I take care of myself?

Elevate your legs and avoid long period of standing or sitting. Wear compression stockings if prescribed. Walking is better for your circulation. When you are sitting, avoid crossing your legs, wearing girdles, leg garters, or other tight fitting garments which can cut off your circulation. Maintain a normal weight. Protect your legs and feet from injury. Keep your skin clean, dry and soft. Call your health care provider's office right away if you see signs of sores developing.

What can be done to prevent chronic venous insufficiency?

CVI often cannot be avoided. However, symptoms can be controlled. A walking program that starts with only a few steps every day but builds slowly and steadily may help prevent the progress of this condition.