University of Pennsylvania Student Health Service
Deep Vein Thrombosis (blood clots in the legs) Prevention

WHAT IS DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS? — Deep vein thrombosis is the medical term for blood clots in the deep veins of the leg. Deep vein thrombosis, or “DVT” for short, can be dangerous.

If a blood clot forms inside a blood vessel, it can clog the vessel and keep blood from getting where it needs to go.

When that happens to one of the veins deep within the leg, blood can back up and cause swelling and pain.

Another problem with blood clots in veins is that they can travel to other parts of the body and clog blood vessels there. Blood clots that form in the legs, for example, can wind up clogging blood vessels in the lungs. This can make it hard to breathe or even lead to death. When blood clots travel to the lungs and clog a blood vessel, doctors call it “pulmonary embolism” or “PE.”

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF DVT? — DVT can cause:

- Swelling
- Pain
- Warmth and redness in the involved leg

Sometimes clots form in the veins that are closer to the surface of the skin (in other words, not the deep ones). Those blood clots cause a different set of symptoms. Blood clots in the veins near the surface of the skin can cause pain, redness, or infection. These clots sometimes also cause the veins to harden and bulge into ridges that look like cords (often called varicose veins). This is most common with the veins below the knee.

If you think you have a blood clot in your leg, call your doctor or nurse right away. Blood clots in the veins near the surface of the skin are not usually dangerous. But blood clots in the deep veins of the leg can be serious. Your doctor or nurse can run tests to find out if you do have a clot.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF BLOOD CLOTS IN THE LUNGS? — Blood clots in the lungs can cause:

- Panting or trouble breathing
- Sharp, knife-like chest pain when you breathe in
- Coughing or coughing up blood
- A rapid heartbeat

If you get any of these symptoms, call 9-1-1. At the hospital, doctors can run tests to find out if you do have a clot.

Blood clots in the lungs can lead to death.

HOW IS DVT TREATED? — DVT is treated with medicines that dissolve clots or keep them from getting bigger. Some of these medicines come in shots and others come in pills.

CAN I DO ANYTHING ON MY OWN TO PREVENT BLOOD CLOTS? — Yes. People sometimes form clots because they have been sitting still for too long. People who travel on long airplane flights, for example, are at increased risk of blood clots. But you can prevent a clot during a long flight by:

- Standing up and walking around every hour or two
- Not smoking just before your trip
- Wearing loose, comfortable clothes
- Shifting your position while seated, and moving your legs and feet often
- Drinking plenty of fluids
- Wearing knee-high compression stockings
- Avoiding alcohol and medicines that make you sleepy, because they can impair your ability to move around