

Department of Haematology - Venous Thromboembolism (VTE) Clinic

Superficial Thrombophlebitis of the Leg: A Patient's Guide

You have been given this leaflet because we think you may have superficial thrombophlebitis.

What is thrombophlebitis?

Phlebitis means inflammation of a vein. **Thrombo(sis)** means a blood clot in a vein. Thrombophlebitis means an inflamed vein, with or without a small blood clot inside the vein.

What causes superficial thrombophlebitis?

Many cases occur for no apparent reason. A slight injury to the vein may trigger the inflammation in some cases. There are a number of risk factors that make it more likely:

- **Varicose veins** – these are unusually enlarged or swollen veins and are prone to minor injuries, which can lead to inflammation.
- **Previous problems with veins** – if someone has had previous superficial thrombophlebitis or a previous blood clot in the deep vein of the leg (known as a deep vein thrombosis (DVT)), they are more likely to get superficial thrombophlebitis.
- **Being overweight**
 - **Intravenous injection** – damage to the veins is common in people who inject illegal drugs into their veins.
 - **Abnormalities of blood clotting factors** – factors which make the blood clot more easily include: using the oral contraceptive pill, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), cancer, smoking, and pregnancy. There are also some less common hereditary blood disorders where blood clots develop more readily than usual.
 - **Blood flowing more slowly than normal (stasis)** – this might occur in veins that are varicose, during long flights, or in people who are immobile, and also following major surgery.

What are the symptoms of superficial thrombophlebitis?

- Swelling, redness, tenderness and pain along a part of the vein are the usual symptoms.
- You may develop a fever (high temperature).
- If a blood clot develops inside the inflamed part of the vein, the vein may then feel hard or knobbly. The blood clot is usually of little concern, as it is small. There are other veins which carry the blood, and bypass the blocked vein.
- When the inflammation settles, a persistent darker area of skin (hyperpigmentation) may remain over the affected vein. A small firm lump may also persist below the skin. This may be tender to the touch for some time.

Do I need any investigations?

Your doctor is usually able to diagnose superficial thrombophlebitis by talking to you and examining the affected area, but an ultrasound may be required, especially if your doctor is concerned that you may have a DVT.

What is the treatment for superficial thrombophlebitis?

Most bouts of superficial thrombophlebitis last for 3-4 weeks. If they are associated with varicose veins, they are likely to recur. One or more of the following treatments may be advised, depending on your symptoms and the severity of the condition:

- **Keep active.** Try to keep up your normal activities. This should be possible unless the pain is severe.
- **A hot flannel (cloth) placed over the vein.** This may ease the pain.
- **Painkilling treatments.** Anti-inflammatory painkillers such as ibuprofen (tablets or gel) may ease the pain and reduce the risk of the superficial thrombophlebitis extending. These are not advised if you are pregnant or asthmatic. Paracetamol tablets are an alternative. Check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist and always read the packet leaflet that explains possible side-effects.
- **Anticoagulation medication.** This inhibits the body's clotting factors and can reduce the risk of developing a DVT. If required, these would be prescribed by a medical professional.
- **Raising the affected leg.** When you rest, raise the affected leg so that your foot is higher than your hip. This helps to reduce swelling and discomfort.
- **Compression (support) stockings.** These may be advised by your doctor if a vein in your leg is affected. They may ease discomfort and reduce swelling whilst the inflammation settles.

Are there any complications from superficial thrombophlebitis?

The inflammation and pain usually settle within a few weeks and most people make a full recovery. Complications are uncommon, but are listed below to give guidance on what to look out for:

- **Infection** – Sometimes the affected vein becomes infected. The pain may then become worse, and the redness spreads. You are likely to feel generally unwell.
- **Blood clot extension** – In some cases, the blood clot can extend further up the vein. If the clot extends, a DVT can develop. This is more likely if the superficial thrombophlebitis is in the upper thigh or the groin.

See your GP or an out of hours doctor urgently if you experience any of the following:

- Inflammation, redness, or hardness spreading up your inner thigh towards your groin or around the back of your knee or calf.
- Swelling of the whole leg.
- Pain becoming suddenly worse.

Call 999 if you get severe shortness of breath, chest pain or cough up blood.

References and further information:

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions/Phlebitis/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Patient UK: www.patient.info/health/superficial-thrombophlebitis-leaflet

How to contact the Anticoagulant Nurse Specialists:

VTE Clinic, Level 2 East Block, Norfolk and Norwich Hospital

Tel: 01603 286286 Bleep 0799 (09.00-17.00 daily)