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TORONTO (CP) - Some chalk it up to getting older or having a career that keeps them on their feet all day, while others point the finger of blame at their mother or their children.

Whatever the reasons, many people who suffer from varicose veins find the blue or purple raised lines that transform nice looking legs into a 3-D road map of Italy unsightly and often painful.

Still, many doctors think of the condition, passed down by a parent or brought on by pregnancy, as merely a cosmetic problem, and prescribe exercise, support pantyhose and long skirts.

George Oreopolous, a vascular surgeon at Toronto General Hospital, sees varicose veins as a real medical issue.

"(People with varicose veins) do have a real illness," said Oreopolous, adding they aren't always given serious consideration because the condition doesn't shorten lives or cause amputations.

"It's not just a cosmetic problem ... it's sometimes minimized, underrepresented in medical school teaching curricula, but is one of the most common things that general practitioners will see in their office."

Varicose veins are swollen blood vessels most commonly found in the legs. They result when the valves that keep blood moving toward the heart become defective, allowing backflow.

Oreopolous said the condition is a treatable problem that won't have an impact on long-term survival, and most patients are able to use their legs. But it can be an annoyance that causes people to lose days at work and be less active, which in turn could compromise their health further.

Often, patients with severe-looking varicose veins are referred to doctors such as Oreopolous.

"In many ways I am the end-of-the-road doctor for some of these problems," he said.



Dr. Martin Braun injects medication in the vein of a patient as ultrasound technician Karen Da Silva uses her scope to find the varicose vein in the patient's leg.

Many people who have spider veins are upset about the appearance of their legs, but they haven't experienced swelling or pain and they don't need to miss work. These are the patients who seek help in private clinics for what they've been told is a cosmetic problem.

Dr. Lisa Kellett sees many people with varicose veins at her dermatology clinic, DLK on Avenue. She treats them with two types of procedures. One is sclerotherapy, in which a chemical solution is injected into the affected area of the veins to irritate the lining causing them to eventually collapse. The other is laser therapy, which uses light to heat up and close the blood vessels.

Those procedures start at \$150-\$250 and each patient may need more than one session.

"Leg veins are tricky. And if anyone tells you that they're not tricky ... you know it's not true," Kellett said from her office in Toronto. "When you see superficial disease it can often indicate deeper disease. And a lot of leg veins recur. It's not like a mole where I treat the mole and it's gone."

She tells all her patients that while she can make the leg look healthier and minimize day-to-day discomfort, she can't completely rid them of the problem.

"People want to do a treatment that is 100 per cent foolproof and it will never come back again. It doesn't exist," she said. "We can make them better ... but they might come back."

If Kellett sees that varicose veins are significant and thinks the blockage may be in the main veins as opposed to superficial ones, she sends patients to a vascular surgeon.

She points out that the procedure done by vein specialists may have a recovery time of a couple of weeks, but it's often covered by provincial medical insurance.

Dieter Glups of Surrey, B.C., said the look of his varicose veins didn't really bother him in his mid 50s, but sometime before his 60th birthday, he noticed pain and swelling.

His doctor referred him to a vascular specialist who recommended surgery or vein stripping, in which an incision is made higher in the leg and the vein is disconnected and followed to the knee.

The surgery requires days or weeks of recovery and may leave scars.

Glups didn't want any time off work, so he opted for sclerotherapy offered by a Vancouver doctor at a private clinic.

Dr. Martin Braun, medical director of the Vancouver Laser and Skin Care Centre, performs the procedure

after mapping the venous system in the legs. With ultrasound pictures, Braun can see exactly where the valves are failing.

Once the problem area is identified on the ultrasound, the sclerotherapy drug is injected into the vein.

In addition to mapping the veins, Braun uses a method in which he foams up the drug.

"You take the liquid and you foam it up. It's like beating egg whites to make a meringue," he said, adding that doctors are limited by the amount of chemical that can be injected at one time for sclerotherapy.

"What the foam does is you get four times the volume, at least. This way I can give you four times the medication," he said. "So the chance of success approaches 100 per cent."

Glups is very happy with the results.

"It's gone. It's simply gone. It's a miracle," he said, adding he was happy not to lose more than a few hours from work.

It's been a year since his sclerotherapy and he said the treatment was worth the cost. He is as active as he was before the pain of the swollen blood vessels forced a more sedentary lifestyle.

Braun laments that Canada does not cover his therapy, which can cost \$1,600 for four sessions of mapping and foam sclerotherapy.

Oreopolous also scratches his head over what's covered by government health insurance and what is deemed a cosmetic procedure.

He said that in Ontario, vein stripping and surgery are covered.

"The ironic thing is even when that surgery is done for so-called cosmetic reasons, it is still covered. Other treatments, such as sclerotherapy, are not covered."

Oreopolous is also working with endovenous lasers, in which a wire is threaded up the vein and a laser fibre is introduced. This takes place while the patient is under a local anesthetic and is being closely monitored by ultrasound.

The procedure takes 2 1/2 minutes in a doctor's office and usually the patient can return to work the same day.

"It accomplishes the same thing that traditional venous surgery does," he said, adding that this newer treatment frees up operating rooms.

But it is expensive and isn't covered by provincial insurance.

Age, gender a few of risk factors that increase chances of varicose veins

By The Canadian Press

Varicose veins are swollen blood vessels most commonly found in the legs, but can also occur in the anus (hemorrhoids), esophagus and scrotum.

After blood is pumped to all the tissues in the body, it must travel back to the heart, often against gravity. Muscle contraction and valves in veins enable blood to travel towards the heart. But sometimes these valves become defective and the blood flows back, causing a bulge in the vein.

The Mayo Clinic, a not-for-profit medical practice in the United States, lists some of the risk factors associated with varicose veins on its website www.mayoclinic.com. These factors increase your risk of developing varicose veins:

- Age: Aging causes wear and tear on the valves in your veins that help regulate blood flow. Eventually, that wear causes the valves to malfunction.
- Sex: Women are more likely than men to develop the condition. Hormonal changes during pregnancy, premenstruation or menopause may be a factor. Female hormones tend to relax vein walls. Taking hormone replacement therapy or birth control pills may increase the risk of varicose veins.
- Genetics: If other family members had varicose veins, there's a greater chance you will too.
- Obesity: Being overweight puts added pressure on veins.
- Standing for long periods of time: Blood doesn't flow as well if you're in the same position for long periods.