

DANGEROUS BLOOD CLOTS: KNOW THE FACTS



While many people know that heart attack is the No. 1 cardiovascular threat and stroke is threat No. 2, too few people know about the No. 3 cardiovascular killer – **venous thromboembolism (VTE) or a blood clot found mostly in the leg and lungs** – and its consequences. And many doctors do not diagnose it early enough to prevent or treat it correctly. *So too many people are dying a preventable death.*

About Blood Clots in the Leg and Lungs

There are two types of abnormal blood clot formation: a blood clot that forms in a vein, usually in the leg or pelvis, is known as a **deep vein thrombosis or DVT**; when the clot breaks off and travels from the leg up to the lungs, it is known as a **pulmonary embolism or PE**, which is a medical emergency that can be life threatening if not treated immediately. Nearly 25 percent of PEs are fatal and the death rate from subsequent PEs is even higher if a person survives the initial episode. A person is at greater risk even months after the initial event. Blood clots in the leg and lungs are responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide, many of which could be avoided with proper diagnosis and treatment.

Symptoms & Signs To Look For

Sometimes there are no noticeable signs or symptoms of DVT in the leg. When they do occur, warning signs in the affected leg may include:

- Pain or tenderness, often starting in the calf
- Swelling, including the ankle and foot
- Warmth
- Redness or noticeable discoloration

Signs and symptoms of a PE in the lungs may include:

- Unexplained shortness of breath
- Rapid breathing
- Chest pain (may be worse with deep breath)
- Rapid heart rate
- Light headedness or passing out

These observable warnings are common with other medical conditions. However if you see them in yourself or someone you know – especially during or after a period of prolonged immobilization – you should seek professional medical help immediately. The longer you wait, the greater the risk. Tragically, most PE fatalities come from a failure to properly diagnose the event rather than a failure to adequately treat it.

Risk Factors and Triggers

Blood clots in the leg and lungs can happen to anyone at any age. Some people do not have any warning signs or symptoms. So it's important for everyone to know the risk factors and to know that certain events or situations can *provoke* or *trigger* a blood clot forming.

There are three main triggers of blood clots:

1. **Being in the hospital** leads to more than 2/3 of all cases of blood clots in the leg. It is the leading cause of *preventable* hospital deaths.
2. **Surgery**, especially hip and knee surgery, and surgery for cancer, puts a patient at more risk.
3. **Not moving for long periods of time** – for example, having to stay on bed rest or traveling on long trips without getting up and walking around – also increases your risk.

For women, there also is a higher risk of VTE if you are:

- **Using estrogen-based medication** like oral contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy
- **Pregnant** or recently gave birth

It's also important to know that there also are other risk factors you cannot control, such as:

- **Older age** – While the chances of VTE are 60 per 100,000 in people aged 18 to 39, the risk soars to 1,134 per 100,000 in people over age 80.
- **Family history** – If someone in your family has had a blood clot, you also could be at more

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risk; your risk becomes even higher if you also are in one of the trigger situations (being in the hospital, going through surgery or having to be on bed rest)

Additionally, **obesity** is a risk factor. There is a two to three times greater risk of VTE among people who are obese (with a BMI >30) compared with non-obese people. Given the worldwide epidemic of obesity, this is an important risk factor and one that is often avoidable.

What Should I Do?

It is possible to lessen the risk of blood clots forming in your leg.

In the hospital:

Incoming hospital patients should be assessed for their risk of developing blood clots. But it is very important for **you** to be **proactive**.

If you are going to have surgery or will stay in the hospital for other reasons, ask your doctor three important questions:

1. What is my risk for a blood clot in my leg?
2. Should I receive some type of prevention for blood clots while I'm in the hospital?
3. Should I also receive some type of prevention for blood clots once I'm discharged from the hospital and for how long?

In general:

If you think you are having signs or symptoms of either deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or pulmonary embolism (PE) – you **must** seek medical or emergency help **immediately**. Ask them:

1. Could this be a blood clot
2. Should I have diagnostic tests?

Above all...

Keep moving. Immobility increases your risk of developing a blood clot. If you are immobile for an extended period of time (4 hours) such as traveling on a long trip – by car, bus or plane – or evening sitting at your desk, particularly with your knees bent - take time to get up, stretch your legs and walk around. This is important for healthy blood flow.

Be proactive. If you think you're at risk for developing a blood clot, talk to your doctor.

For more information, go to WorldThrombosisDay.org.