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Healthy Legs for a Happy Life



by Dr.W.Brown

Healthy Legs for a Happy Life

My favorite part.... I guess it's my legs.

Alessandra Ambrosio

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Introduction

Our legs are truly remarkable. From our waist to our toes, there are more than 60 bones. In a lifetime, we will walk an average of 10,000 miles, or around 9,000 steps every day – that's nearly four times around the globe. So, with all that activity, why is it that people suffer from poor leg health and why is poor leg health becoming more prevalent in society?

Let's think about this: we live in a hustling-bustling world. We're working longer shifts than ever before, whether it's sitting behind a desk or standing for 12 hours at a time. We're driving everywhere. We're ordering our groceries online so we're not even walking around the stores as much. We're putting exercise and dietary requirements right at the bottom of our priority list, and instead of getting that circulation flowing and keeping the weight off after a day at work, we're pouring a refreshing drink and sitting back down in front of the computer or television.

Does any of that sound familiar? Do you suffer from leg problems? If you do, you'll know just how painful, extra-stressful, and unhappy life becomes. You become limited by what you can and can't do. You're frustrated, sore, and fed up.

But, there is a silver lining: you can look after your legs for a healthier and happier life. You can improve the current health of your legs, and in this book, we're going to give you advice, tips, and tons of suggestions to help you along the way.



Leg Problems Are Not Uncommon

Minor leg problems, like stiff muscles, are common. Many problems crop up during recreational and sporting activities, work-related circumstances, overuse, every day wear and tear, and underlying health issues. The issues may be serious or minor and can include symptoms such as:

- Weakness
- Numbness
- Pain
- Cramps
- Swelling
- Tingling
- Change in color
- Change in temperature

Older adults are more prone to leg problems due to the loss of muscle mass as they age. There is a myriad of reasons that leg health problems occur and we are going to discuss the main problems plaguing our society today. These include:

- Economy class syndrome and deep vein thrombosis (DVT)
- Low blood pressure and poor circulation
- Narrowed leg arteries
- Varicose veins
- Diabetes, arthritis, and restless leg syndrome
- Edema, tiredness, nerve damage, sciatica, and lumbar radiculopathy

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Problems can occur when you overdo an activity, for instance, or when you repeatedly do the same activity leading to overuse injury, tendinitis, stress fractures, or bursitis. There are also issues that can occur due to vascular disease, blood clots, and problems affecting your arteries.

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What's more, a range of medicines can result in leg problems. For instance, water pills (also known as diuretics), cholesterol-lowering medicines, and heart medication can cause uncomfortable muscle cramps, and birth control pills can increase your risk of blood clots.

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There Are Loads of Solutions!

Fortunately, there are a variety of solutions to improve the health of your legs. Besides advancements in clothing, like compression socks, physiotherapy, and dietary changes, exercise is paramount.

Walking, in particular, and if you are able to, is an excellent way to tone your leg muscles, improve circulation, and reduce body fat. Amazingly, although we started to walk as toddlers, most of us don't get it right. Typically, we walk the way we sit – so if you are used to hunching over a computer for hours on end, chances are, you walk hunched over, too. The aim is to walk tall and smoothly. Try not to look down as you walk as this puts your head down, your spine then follows, and you place pressure on the neck and back. Instead, keep your head up, looking in front of you. Think of it this way: your head should pull your spine upward and lead, and your knee should lead your leg forward (not your foot). If you tend to lead with your foot, you may find that your body tilts backwards instead of lengthening and taking pressure off the legs. You should aim to transfer your body weight smoothly from one leg to the other.

As you walk, the blood is pumped towards your heart, and any swelling and circulation problems are reduced. You can also put your feet up for a mere ten minutes a day, ensuring they are raised higher than your heart, for additional drainage. You should aim to stretch your legs every single day after a warm shower or bath, too. In fact, if you are up for it, a regular yoga class is a fantastic idea – even if it's just for an hour once a week.

The Health of Your Legs and What You Can Do to Improve It

Watch What You Eat!

Nutritionally, there is also plenty that can be done to improve the health of your legs. By cutting back on saturated fats, predominantly found in dairy products and red meat and opting for mono-saturated fats like olive oil as well as polyunsaturated fats found in oily fish and certain beans, nuts, and cooking oils, you can improve your circulation, reduce swelling, and generally live a healthier and more nutritious life.

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What About Compression Socks?

Compression socks are an excellent solution to poor leg health, too, particularly cotton compression socks which allow your skin to breathe while you reap the benefits. We already find them on the legs of a wide swatch of the population, such as runners, flight attendants, pregnant women, pilots, nurses, people recovering from surgery, and those at risk for blood clots. But, compression socks are great for a wider variety of leg health problems.

The blood in the veins usually works against gravity to flow back to your heart and anything that impedes that flow, be it lack of movement, standing for too long, circulation problems, deep vein thrombosis, narrowed arteries, low blood pressure, and other issues, can result in the walls of the veins in your legs weakening and the blood pooling in the lower legs and feet, leading to swelling in your legs, leg fatigue, and pain. Compression socks work to squeeze the leg tissues and walls of the leg veins to help blood return to the heart. They also aid with the flow of fluid that surrounds the cells, in turn, reducing swelling. Overall, improving the flow of blood will make your legs feel less fatigued and when you are less fatigued, you feel less stressed, happier, and more able to take on the world!

Whether you are a nurse who works extraordinarily long shifts, someone who stands or sits for extended periods of time, or even a pregnant woman, you can benefit from wearing cotton compression socks. In fact, no matter your age, if you love to go for long walks and hikes, frequently hop on long-haul flights, and spend hours upon hours exploring different countries on foot – compression socks should be a staple item in your wardrobe.

Cotton compression socks are specially designed to prevent various leg and circulation disorders and encourage optimal blood circulation. Compression socks aren't actually a brand-new invention. We can trace them as far back as the Middle Ages. During the 19th Century, different fabrics, such as bamboo, silk, and linen, were used along with wool to improve the strength of the socks. Today, though, we use high-quality cotton to strengthen the compression socks and ensure you enjoy optimal benefits – they also look great!

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3 Major Benefits of Wearing Cotton Compression Socks

1 - Prevents Swelling and Inflammation

If you have a job where you stand or sit for a long time every day, you probably know what it is like to have swollen, inflamed, and sore legs. Various professions, such as nursing and flight attendants, actually insist on compression socks as part of the dress code. Nursing, especially, is a tough profession, and nurses need to be fit, fast, and on their feet all day. Generally, nurses stand for more than 5 hours at a time which can lead to swelling and inflammation of their legs and to avoid this, cotton compression socks are highly recommended. The same goes for pregnant women who are dealing with additional weight on their legs, as well as tourists going on long walks and hikes, and the elderly who struggle with poor blood circulation.

2 - Safe Guarding Your Legs

Cotton compression socks are made from a powerful fabric that renders the socks strong enough to protect legs from abrasions and scratches – one of the number one reasons that athletes use compression socks when training and competing, and another reason they are ideal for hikes, camping, and extra-long walks.

3 - Encourage Circulation

As we have discussed, cotton compression socks can help to enhance blood flow in the legs and ankles. They work to help veins accelerate blood up to the heart.

Cotton compression socks are not just limited to nurses, the pregnant, and those with a variety of leg problems. Remember, you should always consult your physician before buying compression socks or embarking on a new exercise and diet regime. Cotton compression socks require proper guidance and monitoring but, our high-quality cotton compression socks are proven to improve circulation and make your legs feel better overall!

If you are experiencing leg problems, or you suspect you may suffer from issues later on in life, this book is for you. In the final chapter, we will discuss a variety of ways to improve the health of your legs and in each chapter, we offer dietary and exercise suggestions for each health problem. So, let's get started!



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List of Conditions that may affect Legs' Health

There are several causes of poor leg health. In this book we will discuss the most common and what you can do to prevent or improve the condition of your legs.

– Economy Class Syndrome and DVT

How often have you opted for the window seat during a long-haul flight? It's great watching the world go by from the sky, isn't it? But, it can affect both your legs and your overall health. In fact, it increases the risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT), or "economy class syndrome." But, it's not only flying that can lead to DVT, sitting at a desk for hours on end also causes blood to pool in your lower legs, leading to a variety of symptoms.

Not only can sitting for prolonged periods that can lead to DVT – those with diabetes and obesity are also at risk. Metabolic syndrome, too, which is the start of developing diabetes, can lead to conditions within the veins that make the likelihood of DVT greater. All of these conditions are linked to chronic inflammation which carries the additional risk of poor circulation and clotting blood.



Economy class syndrome occurs when a thrombus, or blood clot, develops in the lower leg between your knee and ankle. Some clots can be extremely painful, but if it is quickly diagnosed and treated, you can avoid a life-threatening situation. However, a blood clot that forms in your deep veins poses an immediate threat on your life if it is not detected. What happens, is the clot forms in the invisible deep vein and then breaks free, travelling towards the heart. Once it lodges in your lung artery, a "pulmonary embolism" can occur which is fatal if it not diagnosed and treated right away.

What's more, the types of places you sit for long periods, such as offices and airplanes, have dry air. This leads to dehydration as it lowers the amount of fluid in your blood stream, making your blood thicker and more prone to clotting. Low air pressure in airplane cabins makes dehydration worse, lowering the pressure the leg muscles are usually able to put on the veins and making them less able to push blood back from the legs.

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Who's at Risk?

Economy class syndrome happens in any class of long-haul flight, be it economy, business, or first class, and as many as 5% of passengers may be at risk. The same goes for desk-workers who sit for eight or more hours a day, and people who travel in cars for hours on end. Typically, the likelihood of developing DVT depends on several factors, such as your weight, sex, health, pregnancy, medication, and how long the flight is. What's more, dehydration thickens our blood and consuming caffeine and alcohol can worsen the situation, causing the blood to clot more frequently.

Altitude is also a factor. As an airplane ascends, the pressure in the cabin falls. So, by the time the plane reaches its cruising altitude, the pressure in the cabin can drop to as low as 8,000 feet up in a mountain, affecting your body and the formation of blood clots.

Signs and Symptoms

- Tenderness in the legs
- Pain
- Heaviness
- Cramping
- Blue toes
- Varicose veins
- Warmth
- Swelling
- Redness in the legs
-

How Can DVT Affect Your Life?

Blood clots as a result of DVT can wreak havoc on your veins and result in symptoms that last for years.

Blood clots that fail to heal can result in damage to the valves inside your veins, leading to varicose veins and a host of other symptoms related to post-thrombotic syndrome.

We mentioned pulmonary embolism at the beginning of this chapter. But, a blood clot in your lungs isn't the only significant complication that can occur. While many people who experience DVT can recover fully, some 40 percent continue to experience problems in their legs for years. Referred to as post-thrombotic syndrome, the symptoms can be debilitating and excruciating.

Severe post-thrombotic syndrome can result in ulcers and sores that can become chronic and difficult to treat. It becomes a lifelong problem, with symptoms coming and going over time, with the first symptoms typically showing a year or two after DVT.

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Suggested Solutions

There are a few things you can do to limit your chances of developing economy class syndrome.

Drop the Weight

Obesity doubles your risk of DVT, especially in women taller than five foot six or men taller than six feet. That's because taller individuals have to pump blood farther and are working against the force of gravity which can reduce blood flow and circulation in the legs, increasing the risk of clotting.

Move Around

Raising and lowering your heels while seated, and walking to engage your calf muscles helps to squeeze the veins and propel blood upwards, preventing DVT. Immobility is why long flights are the riskiest for economy class syndrome, but so is sitting at a desk all day long. Physicians recommend that you get up at least every hour and raise and lower the heels and rotate your ankles when you are sitting. You should also avoid crossing your feet when sitting for extended periods. You can find some great workout tips to use while wearing your cotton compression socks right here: <http://livelighter.org/tips-for-using-compression-socks-in-your-workout/>.

Add Fish to Your Diet

According to reports¹, eating fish three or more times a week can lower your chances of developing DVT by as much as 48 percent. The omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish or fish oil supplements are known to reduce inflammation and therefore prevent vein damage and clot formation.

Stay Hydrated, But Avoid Alcohol

When sitting for prolonged periods, keep your body hydrated. But avoid alcohol and caffeine which deplete the body of hydration. Overall, you can't go wrong with water for good health.

Wear Compression Socks

Compression socks can help you avoid the risk of blood clots and DVT. They can also help to ease or prevent the symptoms of post-thrombotic syndrome. If you are a nurse, pregnant, or tend to stand or sit for extended periods of time, you should consider cotton compression socks. These socks are designed to stabilize the muscles and restrict muscle movement which means you can look forward to more energy that will help get you through those tediously long shifts.

¹<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/fish/>

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– Low Blood Circulation

Do the muscles in your legs ache more, resulting in you being less mobile? Perhaps you have a sore on one of your feet that is taking forever to heal? Maybe it's poor circulation. If you have poor blood circulation, chances are, your legs are not receiving sufficient amounts of blood. This can lead to a buildup of plaque and a variety of other factors that slow down blood circulation and limit the effectiveness of circulation to the legs.

There are various life habits, behaviors, and medical conditions that can make you susceptible to poor circulation, and it can affect people of all ages. Left untreated, it can result in serious damage to your heart, brain, limbs, liver, and kidney, not to mention itchy, unsightly, and circulation-restricting chilblains!

Who's at Risk?

While poor blood circulation is more prominent in older adults, it should be taken seriously at any age. There are certain factors that can put you at risk of poor circulation, and therefore poor leg health, such as:

- Diabetes – this leads to damage to the blood vessels and nerves, resulting in inflammation. Foot circulation is most affected, leading to severe pain and sores that take ages to heal. We will discuss diabetes in further detail in chapter 5.
- Alcoholism and smoking – people who smoke and drink are at greater risk of poor circulation due to the damaging affect the substances have on your blood vessels.
- Sedentary people – a sedentary lifestyle and occupation can have a significant effect on the health of our nerve fibers. Extra weight tends to apply pressure and wear on your tissues which eventually results in nerve damage.
- Shingles, Lyme disease, and hepatitis C along with other infectious diseases can affect the way the nerves function, leading to poor circulation, the pooling of blood in the lower legs, and the risk of clots.
- Autoimmune disorders such as arthritis and Lupus also have debilitating effects on the nerves.
- **Signs and Symptoms**

There are a wide variety of signs and symptoms of poor circulation to be weary of:

Numbness in the Limbs

Are your legs “falling asleep” more often? That's a sign of the blood flow being cut off. The more frequently numbness and tingling occurs, the more likelihood there is of a serious circulation issue.

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Swelling in the Feet

Poor circulation can swell in your extremities which is a result of an imbalance of nutrients as well as your body's inability to retain fluid in your blood vessels. When your circulatory system malfunctions, fluid can escape, settling into surrounding tissue in the legs and feet, making them swell.

Cold Extremities

When you have poor circulation, blood struggles to travel to your toes, and since blood carries heat from your core to your toes, inadequate circulation can lead to your toes feeling colder than the rest of your body.

Skin Discoloration

When your feet fail to get enough oxygenated blood, you may notice the skin covering your legs and feet discoloring. If they take on a purple or blue tone, it's a sure-fire sign that your circulatory system is not functioning the way it ought to.

Leg Ulcers

Rash-like ulcers that develop around your knees and ankles are another sign of poor circulation. If you notice patches of inflamed, sore skin on your legs that is not healing, your circulatory system may be in jeopardy.

How Poor Circulation Can Affect Your Life

Poor circulation can lead to peripheral artery disease – a narrowing of the arteries and legs which limits blood flow to the muscles. Early symptoms of this condition begin in the legs and feet and may affect one or both limbs. It can lead to severe pain in your feet, calves, and thighs, and result in cold, blue feet and loss of hair on the legs and feet, while leading to a weakened or absent pulse in your extremities.

Poor circulation can also result in digestive problems, affecting the digestive tract and causing constipation and difficulty digesting. A weakened immune system is another effect of weak circulation and your body will be less able to detect and fight off pathogens to keep you healthy. As a result, you may fall ill easier and injuries and wounds will take a lot longer to heal.

Exhaustion is another affect. When your blood flow slows down, it restricts how much fuel is delivered to the muscles and with less nutrients and oxygen, you'll feel tired quicker. You'll experience sore muscles, difficulty breathing, and less endurance overall. What's more, you may experience a squeezing pain in the chest, known as angina. Less blood flow to the heart means more pressure around the heart and the heavy feeling will come and go at random, signifying poor circulation.

A final affect worth mentioning is the result poor circulation has on our brain function. The brain relies greatly on blood flow and without it, you will be less able to focus. It can also affect both your long-term and short-term memory.

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As you can see, poor circulation doesn't just affect your leg health, it can affect your entire body's ability to function. Fortunately, there are solutions.

Suggested Solutions

There are effective treatments available for circulatory issues. Varicose veins, for example, which we will discuss in chapter 4, can be removed and clogged arteries may be unblocked. But, prevention is your number one defense against circulatory problems. Even in later life, simple measures like a brisk walk every day and quitting smoking can keep your circulation at bay.

No Smoking

By now, you realize that a low-fat diet and regular exercise are common denominators in the fight against leg health problems. What's more, controlling high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels can help improve circulation and prevent achy legs. Giving up smoking is essential to controlling leg artery problems. The toxins in cigarettes don't only damage your lungs, they harm the heart and arteries, too, and there is a strong association between leg artery issues and smoking.

Washing

Wash your feet daily using a gentle soap and then blot them dry and massage in moisturizing lotion to improve leg and feet circulation.

Footwear

Wear sensible, low-heeled, comfortable, and well-fitted shoes along with cotton compression socks to keep your spine aligned and your circulation flowing.

Trim the Dietary Fat

Most people with high cholesterol, leg artery disease, and poor circulation need to trim the dietary fat. A leaner and more carefully controlled diet can help to lower blood fats that run throughout your body.

Keep Active

While leg artery disease and poor circulation can be uncomfortable, you need to keep active. Take a brisk walk for just half an hour every day, or at the very least, three times a week. Walking encourages the development of collateral circulation, via unblocked vessels in the legs while training those larger muscles to use oxygen efficiently. Wearing compression socks while exercising will help to get the circulation flowing, too.

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Sleep Elevated

Keep your head up at night. Try to sleep with a wedged-shape pillow to elevate your upper body and therefore send blood down to your legs to increase circulation.

– Narrowed Leg Arteries

“Narrowed leg arteries” is a simple term for lower extremity peripheral arterial disease (PAD). During PAD, the lining of your arterial blood vessels becomes damaged which results in a buildup of cholesterol. As the arteries harden, they become blocked or narrowed, causing your blood flow to decrease. When this happens, you will experience cramps, discomfort, and even pain in your calves, thighs, and hips when you walk. This discomfort is referred to as *claudication*².

Typically, claudication occurs when you are physically active and is quickly relieved when you rest. But, when your leg arteries are narrowed, the blood flow struggles to increase as you exercise, causing the pain. Often, the pain will worsen when you elevate your legs, like when you are lying in bed or curled up on the sofa for a long period of time.

Who’s at Risk?

People at risk of narrowed leg arteries are those:

- Who smoke
- Have high blood pressure
- Are obese
- Have high levels of cholesterol
- Are diabetic
- Who lead a sedentary lifestyle
- Who have a family history of heart disease

People who smoke are most at risk of narrowed leg arteries since the degree of damage to your arterial wall lining has shown to be directly related to the amount of tobacco consumed.

²<http://www.medicinenet.com/ Claudication/article.htm>

Signs and Symptoms

There are several symptoms to look out for, such as:

- Weakness or numbness in the legs
- Painful cramping in the calves, thighs, and hips after activities such as climbing stairs and walking
- Changes to the color of your legs
- Sores on your feet, toes, and legs that are not healing
- Coldness in your legs and feet
- Slow growth of toenails
- Slower hair growth or hair loss on legs and feet
- Shinier skin on your legs
- A weak pulse or even no pulse in the legs or feet

If PAD progresses, you could also experience pain when you are lying down and at rest. The pain can be intense enough to disrupt sleep, but hanging your legs over the edge of your bed or getting up to talk around can temporarily relieve the pain.

How Narrowed Leg Arteries Can Affect Your Life

If PAD is a result of a buildup of plaques in the blood vessels, you are also at risk of:

- Heart attack or stroke – PAD is not just limited to your legs. Fat deposits can also build up in arteries supplying your brain and heart.
- Critical limb ischemia – a condition that starts off with open sores that battle to heal, an infection of the legs, or an injury. This condition occurs when the injury or infection progresses and can lead to gangrene, sometimes necessitating the amputation of the limb that is affected.

Suggested Solutions

As scary as narrowed leg arteries sound, there are a few things you can do to prevent PAD or ease the pain.

Stop Smoking

By now, you should have realized that smoking is the root of many leg health problems. By quitting smoking, you can increase your walking distance by two or threefold and reduce the likelihood of stroke or a heart attack. If you find it hard to stop smoking, talk to a clinic nurse or even consider hypnosis.

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Get Regular Exercise

We really can't express the importance of exercise for keeping your legs healthy. Regular activity will encourage the smaller blood vessels – your arteries – in your legs to enlarge, improving the supply of blood. With regular exercise, there is a chance that your PAD symptoms will improve and you will be able to walk further before pain develops.

Typically, walking is the best medicine for PAD. Try to walk until you feel the pain creeping in and then rest for a couple of minutes. Continue to walk once the pain has eased. Try to keep this up for just half an hour each day, or even an hour a day twice a week.

Other activities like swimming and cycling will also help to improve your fitness and are great for the heart. But, since walking has proved best for the symptoms of PAD, swimming and cycling should be done as additional activities.

Lose Weight if You Need to

Losing weight will reduce the demands on your leg muscles and heart and reduce the risk of narrowed arteries. Always aim to eat a healthy diet that includes:

- Less fatty meats, full-cream dairy, cheeses, fried food, and butter
- More low-fat, polyunsaturated, and mono-unsaturated foods
- 7 – 9 portions of fresh fruit and vegetables each day
- Lean red meat and poultry
- 2 – 3 portions of oily fish per week, such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, and herring
- Less salt

Ditch the Drinks

Research suggests that drinking small quantities of alcohol can reduce the risk of PAD. But, the exact amounts aren't clear. Ideally, try not to exceed the recommended daily allowance of alcohol which is no more than 14 units of alcohol per week for women, or no more than three units per day. Try to have two or more alcohol-free days per week. Typically, one unit is equal to half a pint of beer, or a small measure of spirits, or two thirds of a small glass of wine.

Look After Your Feet

Take good care of your feet and try to avoid hurting them. Injuries can lead to ulcers or infections and in turn the supply of blood to your extremities may be reduced. Also, avoid wearing tight socks and shoes that can reduce the flow of blood. Instead, opt for good quality, combed cotton compression socks that promote blood flow and good foot and leg care, while maintaining an optimal foot and leg temperature to keep circulation flowing.

Medication

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PAD patients are often prescribed a medication called clopidogrel. It doesn't help with the symptoms, but it does help to prevent blood clots forming in your leg arteries by reducing the stickiness of platelets in your bloodstream.

Surgery

As a last resort, some people with PAD turn to surgery, but it is not usually needed. Your doctor may refer you to a surgeon should your symptoms become severe, and if you tend to have pain when resting.

Surgery really is the last resort. If you follow the above self-help tips and keep active, you will be able to keep your legs in strong condition.

– Varicose Veins



Did you know that veins are blood vessels? Their job is to return the deoxygenated blood from the outer parts of your body back to your lungs and heart. If the veins become abnormally thick, enlarged, or full of turns and twists, they are referred to as varicose veins. The most common places for varicose veins to occur are the thighs and legs. Typically, varicose veins occur as a result of the pressure of your body weight, the force of gravity, and the job of carrying blood from the legs up to the heart. When we think about other veins in our body, our leg veins have the hardest job having to carry the blood all the way back up. They endure the most pressure.

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Who Is at Risk?

Around half of all women and about 40 percent of men suffer from varicose veins, especially those individuals who are 50 years and older. There are a variety of factors that increase the likelihood of you developing varicose veins, such as:

- Aging – as we age, the valves in our veins weaken and don't work as well as they should.
- Changes in hormones – these mostly happen during menopause, pregnancy, puberty, and when we take birth control pills.
- Medical history – some people are just born with weak vein valves which can increase the risk of varicose veins.
- Obesity – being overweight for your body type can place additional pressure on your veins leading to varicose veins.
- Pregnancy – when you are pregnant, there is a large increase in the amount of blood in your body. This leads to veins enlarging. If varicose veins develop during pregnancy, they usually disappear within a few months after delivery and wearing compression socks during pregnancy can help keep your circulation flowing in your legs.
- Inactivity – standing or sitting for long periods of time force the veins to work even harder to pump blood up to the heart. This problem can be exacerbated when we sit with our legs crossed or bent.

Signs and Symptoms

Varicose veins don't always cause pain. Signs to look out for include:

- Veins that look bulging and twisted
- Veins that appear blue or dark purple in color
- Bleeding from the varicose veins
- Worsened pain after standing or sitting for a long time
- Itching around your veins
- A heavy or aching feeling in the legs
- A sore cord in your vein with red discoloration in the skin
- Throbbing, cramping, swelling, and burning in the lower legs

Any changes in color, inflammation of the skin, ulcers, or hardening of vein close to your ankle could mean you have a severe form of vascular disease and will need to seek medical attention as soon as possible.

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How Can Varicose Veins Affect Your Life?

Varicose veins can result in long-term complications as they can stop your blood flowing properly. Most people won't develop difficulties, but there are a few things to be aware of:

- Bleeding – varicose veins that are close to the surface of the skin may bleed if you bump or cut your leg. If this happens, lie down and raise your leg while applying direct pressure to your wound.
- Blood clot – if a clot forms in a vein close to the surface of the skin, it could lead to deep vein thrombosis or thrombophlebitis, both of which result in inflammation of the veins and can lead to serious complications.
- Varicose eczema – this is a condition that causes the skin to become flaky and red.
- Venous leg ulcers – ulcers develop when there is increased pressure in the veins of the lower leg.

Suggested Solutions

Generally, doctors tend to be conservative when treating varicose veins. The best you can really do is make the appropriate lifestyle changes.

Lifestyle Changes

To prevent or ease varicose veins:

- Exercise to improve circulation
- Try not to stand or sit for extended periods of time
- Maintain a healthy weight

Compression

Compression socks place just enough pressure on the legs to allow blood to flow easier to the heart and decrease swelling.

– Restless Leg Syndrome

Restless leg syndrome is a relatively common condition that can affect your nervous system. The result is uncomfortable sensations that leave you with the urge to continuously move your legs. It's kind of like a crawling or creeping sensation and can result in symptoms that range from mild to totally unbearable. Restless legs are usually worse at night time or when you are trying to rest, leading to your sleep pattern being disturbed.

Interestingly, diabetes can lead to restless leg syndrome. The uncontrolled high blood sugars in diabetics, as we have discussed, can result in peripheral neuropathy, or nerve damage, and that damage is a contributor to restless leg syndrome. In fact, patients with type 2 diabetes commonly suffer with restless legs.

Restless leg syndrome has two categories: primary and secondary. The primary category does not have any known cause, but doctors think that genes seem to play a role, and the onset of restless leg syndrome usually occurs before the age of 40. The secondary category affects people over 40 years of age and is associated with several conditions that can make symptoms worse, such as:

- The side effects of medication – some medicines, such as antipsychotics and antidepressants, as well as certain allergy medications can make restless legs worse.
- Pregnancy – ladies in their final trimester may experience restless leg syndrome, but symptoms tend to go away within a month of giving birth.
- Chronic health concerns – besides diabetes, Parkinson's disease, iron deficiency, an underactive thyroid, and kidney failure can all exacerbate restless leg syndrome.

Other triggers of restless leg syndrome include alcohol, smoking, stress, anxiety, caffeine before bedtime, and either too much vigorous exercise at night or a lack of physical activity.

While there is not a cure for this syndrome, there are a few ways you can control the condition and make your life easier. Self-management techniques include:

- Lifestyle changes – cutting out nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol
- Warm baths
- Regular leg massages
- A regular exercise routine, but not before bedtime
- Establishing a regular sleep pattern. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day and avoid taking naps at night.

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– Edema and Sciatica

Besides the leg health conditions, we have already mentioned, there are a few more you may not have considered. Let's take a brief look at them and what you can do to keep your legs healthy.

Edema

Edema is the medical term for swelling. Our legs can swell from inflammation or injury, pregnancy, infections, old age, medications, and a broad range of other medical problems, as well as long periods of standing or sitting, touring around a foreign country all day, going on hikes, and much more. Edema occurs as a result of your small blood vessels leaking and releasing fluid into the surrounding tissues. When the extra fluid builds up, the tissue swells. A broad range of things can cause edema, from skin infections to a twisted ankle, and even an insect bite or sting. It can also come from other conditions or when the balance of substances in your blood is out of whack, for instance:

- Allergic reactions – when you suffer an allergy, the blood vessels leak fluids into the affected spot.
- Low albumin – albumin along with other proteins in your blood are like sponges, keeping fluid in the vessels. If albumin is low, edema may result.
- Critical illness – these can lead to fluids leaking into tissues, causing swelling.
- Obstruction of flow – if drainage is blocked, fluid backs up, potentially causing a blood clot in the deep veins of the legs.
- Liver disease – extreme liver disease can lead to fluid retention and low levels of albumin.
- Heart disease – when your heart weakens and is unable to pump blood the way it should, fluid slowly builds up, creating leg edema.

Edema in the legs can make your legs feel heavy and can affect walking. Severe cases of leg edema can interfere with the flow of blood, leading to skin ulcers. Treating edema is about treating underlying causes. For example:

- Blood clots in the leg can be treated with blood thinners
- Tumors that block blood flow can be removed
- Leg edema related to liver or heart disease can be treated with diuretics, or water pills.

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While edema, in terms of infections and injury, may be hard to avoid, cutting back on sodium, making sure you get regular exercise, and even eating circulation-inducing foods like cayenne pepper and capsicums, can all help to keep your legs in a stronger, healthier condition which means they are better able to fight off infections and injuries can heal quicker. Wearing cotton compression socks can help with circulation, too, while helping to stabilize muscles and give you a fantastic boost in energy levels because your legs will feel better!

Sciatica

If you have ever experienced sciatica, you know how painful it can be. Usually, the pain starts in the lower back and moves down into the buttocks and along the back of a leg. The pain is often caused by pressure on your sciatic nerve which is a result of a herniated disc, muscle strain, or bone spurs. Fortunately, you can play a major role in the prevention, treatment, and even recovery of the leg pain. Sciatica can improve significantly with physical therapy, rest, and a range of self-care measures.

With sciatica, the leg pain can range from mild to severe and may be acute or chronic. Chronic sciatic-related pain usually lasts for more than three months and it can be hard to find its source. It may be felt consistently or become worse with certain activities. Contributing factors include tissue scarring, nerve damage, arthritis, or even the mental effects of pain. Acute pain, however, comes on suddenly and tends to heal within a couple of days to weeks. The severity of the pain is relational to the amount of injury to the tissue. The source of the pain might be in the nerves, discs, ligaments, muscles, or spinal joints.

Classically, sciatica begins in the lower back and buttocks. It will affect one leg, traveling down the back of your thigh, past your knee, and, at times, into the calf and foot. Typically, the pain will feel worse in the leg than in your back. It can range from mild achiness to a severe burning pain. Tingling and numbness may also occur in your leg. Sitting is usually the worst cause of the pain as the weight is greatest on the discs in this position. Activities like twisting and bending make the pain worse, but lying down seems to bring relief. Walking and running can also help to ease the pain.

Sciatica healing starts with self-care. It can be resolved with:

- Gentle stretches
- Pain relievers
- Rest
- Heat
- Ice

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- Massage
- Short periods of bed rest
- Regular exercise
- Always lifting items properly
- Avoid sitting for too long
- Good posture when sleeping, sitting, moving, and standing
- Relaxation management
- An ergonomic work area
- Healthy weight and good nutritional habits
- No smoking

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The Health of Your Legs and What You Can Do to Improve It

The importance of leg health cannot be emphasized enough. Too many people take their perfect pins for granted, but the legs are a passport to complete mobility and independence. We're living longer, and when you reach your 70s and 80s, you surely want to be able to continue doing the things you love? Looking after your legs will ensure that you enjoy mobility and good circulation as you get older. It means you will be better positioned to fight off infections and for ulcers and sores to heal quicker. You will be able to continue exercising and keep a wide range of diseases and chronic illnesses at bay. You will have better coordination and strength, and be able to get up and down from furniture and beds with ease. With this in mind, let's look at what it takes to keep legs healthy.

10 Tips for Leg Pain Self-Care

In each chapter, we have discussed the benefits of general self-care such as quitting smoking, adding omega-3 oils to your diet, keeping your weight healthy, and cutting out "bad fats," as well as regular exercise and stretching. Here are 10 more self-care tips to keep your legs healthy.

Remember to consult your doctor before trying new remedies.

1 - A Cold Compress

If your leg pain occurs after strenuous exercise, apply a cold compress to reduce pain and numb the affected area. Cold compresses also control swelling and inflammation. Just wrap a couple of ice cubes in a thin towel and apply to the area for 10 minutes, while keeping your leg elevated.

2 - Turmeric

Turmeric is an antioxidant with powerful anti-inflammatory properties. All you have to do is mix a teaspoon of turmeric powder with a little warm sesame oil to create a paste. Apply the paste to the legs and rub gently. Leave the paste on your legs for about 30 minutes and then rinse it off with warm water. Alternatively, you could take turmeric as a dietary supplement or drink a glass of hot turmeric milk every day.

3 - Soak in Epsom Salts

Epsom salts are full of magnesium, which is an essential electrolyte that works to regulate nerve signals in your body. It also works as a muscle relaxant and can reduce pain, swelling, and inflammation. Add a

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half a cup of Epsom salt to your hot bath and stir it in. Soak your legs in the bath for 15 minutes. You can do this up to 3 times per week. You can also consume more magnesium-rich foods to help reduce swelling, such as:

- Soymilk
- Bananas
- Whole grains
- Tofu
- Pumpkin seeds
- Green leafy vegetables
- Walnuts

Regular Massage

Massage helps to promote recovery from muscle damage that might be causing your leg pain. Just ten minutes of massage therapy can re-attune inflammatory signals after exercise-induced damage to the muscles. Massage also improves circulation and promotes relaxation while alleviating anxiety and stress. You can massage your legs yourself by rubbing warm mustard, coconut, or olive oil on the legs and using gentle, firm strokes to rub the oil in. You can self-massage two to three times a day.

Apple Cider Vinegar

The vinegar can help to reduce pain in the legs and is especially beneficial for pain associated with arthritis. The alkalizing effect of apple cider vinegar helps dissolve uric acid crystals in your bloodstream, and it removes the buildup of toxins in connective tissues and joints. What's more, apple cider vinegar provides a good dose of calcium, potassium, and essential minerals that help to ease inflammation and pain. You can add a cup or two of unfiltered, raw apple cider vinegar to your bathtub with warm water and soak your sore legs for half an hour, once a day. You can also mix a tablespoon or two of the vinegar in a glass of warm water, add a drop of raw honey, and drink daily.

Ginger

Ginger is well-known for its anti-inflammatory and pain-reducing properties. It can also improve circulation and blood flow and relieve muscle pain. Use ginger oil to massage your legs two to three times a day or drink ginger tea several times a day – but make it fresh by simmering fresh slices of ginger in a cup of water for 10 minutes and adding raw honey and lemon for flavor.



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Tart Cherry Juice

If your leg pain stems from strenuous activity, poor circulation, and general muscle soreness, try drinking tart cherry juice. Tart cherries have tremendous anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that can both prevent and treat soft tissue pain. Either drink a cup of the juice once a day or eat half a cup of fresh, organic cherries.

Potassium

A potassium deficiency can contribute to leg pain. It is an essential nutrient for optimal nerve and muscle functioning and it prevents dehydration. To get enough potassium in your diet, eat foods such as sweet potatoes, baked potatoes, plums, bananas, prune juice, tomato juice, and raisins.

Vitamin D

If you have leg pain, it's worth having your vitamin D levels checked. Vitamin D can help to ease leg pain and regulate phosphorus and calcium which are both essential for proper muscle and nerve functioning. To combat leg pain, try to expose your body to early morning sunlight for about 15 minutes per day and include foods rich in vitamin D in your diet, such as fortified milk, salmon, mackerel, sardines, cereal, and orange juice.

Lemons

Lemons are a fantastic source of antioxidants that help to relieve leg pain and maintain your body's pH levels which also prevents inflammation. Add the juice of a lemon and a drop of raw honey to a cup of warm water and drink daily, or mix equal amounts of castor oil and lemon juice and massage into your legs a few times a day.

Exercise Your Way to Great Leg Health

Good, old-fashioned exercise is a key ingredient to maintaining the health of your legs. The below exercises are designed to help keep your legs strong and ensure your circulation is top-notch. The exercises make use of stability and balance which force your legs, and in fact your entire body, to work harder. Remember to consult a physician before embarking on a new exercise regime. These exercises are only intended as a guide. Don't try to attempt something beyond your range of motion or that could put your health and balance at risk. People with diabetes, arthritis, and sedentary individuals particularly, should stick to gentle cardio activities like regular, brisk walks and swimming to maintain circulation in their legs. Swimming has the added benefit of resistance training which is fantastic for keeping legs toned, strong, and improving balance and blood flow.

Older adults and those with severe leg pain may like to try mild forms of Tai Chi and yoga, specifically aimed at ailment sufferers. Stretch classes will also help to keep your leg muscles warm and supple.

Always begin a workout with a proper 10 minute warm up of brisk walking, cycling, or even gentle marching in place.



The Exercises

- Single-leg touchdowns – stand next to wall and balance on one leg, ensuring your posture is neutral. Slowly bend at the hips, knees, and ankles and reach down to touch the outside of the supporting leg's foot with your opposite hand. Slowly return to the starting position. This exercise needs to be executed slowly with a great deal of control. Repeat on the other side. If you can't reach your foot, aim for the middle of the shin.
- Balanced lunges – lunges are excellent for maintaining strong legs and great posture. Stand with your legs shoulder-width apart and your hands on your hips or on a ballet pole for support. Take a large step forward and slowly lower your hips downwards until both your knees are at 90 degrees. Push back off your front leg, through your heel, and into the standing position. Get your balance, and then repeat with the other leg.
- Stability ball draw-ins – lie on your back with your heels and bottom part of your calves on a stability ball with your toes pointing upwards. Keep your arms straight out to the sides with your palms on the floor. Squeeze your buttocks and press your hips upwards to form a straight line with your body all the way from your chest to your ankles. Bring the ball towards your body by bending the knees. Bring the ball as close to your body as you can, and then slowly and in a controlled manner, return the ball to the starting position.

Exercises to Improve Circulation

The Ankles

Ankle rotations are great if you sit at a desk for long hours or even on a long-haul flight. While sitting, turn your ankles in small circles. You can either do one ankle at a time or both together. Rotate the ankle for 30 seconds clockwise and then do the same counterclockwise.

The Knees

Exercises for the knees improve circulation and strengthen the front of your thighs. You can also do this exercise sitting down: tighten the front of your thighs, bend the knee, and then bring the leg about 12 inches off the floor. Do this 20 times with each leg. If you are able to, you can stretch the muscles a little further by bringing the bent knee up to your chest and holding that position for 15 seconds before slowly lowering your leg.

The Feet

Stretching and flexing your feet is an excellent form of circulation exercise that will help to keep your blood flowing freely throughout the legs while you recline or sit for extended periods of time. Start with your feet flat on the floor and place your weight on your toes. At all times, keep the toes in contact with the floor. While your toes are on the floor, lift up the heels and hold the position for three seconds. Return your feet to the starting position. Then, keep your heels on the floor as you point your toes upwards. Aim to perform 10 repetitions of each exercise on each foot.

It is worth noting that leg exercises performed while sitting are amazing for promoting circulation. However, stretches should not be your only form of exercise. We cannot stress enough how effective walking is for keeping the circulatory system healthy, reducing edema, and preventing deep vein thrombosis. Whether you are on a plane or sitting behind a computer screen all day, or just too sore to move around much, aim to get up throughout the day and take a short walk to really stretch the legs, increase circulation, and eliminate nerve compression. On long-haul flights, take full advantage of layovers to take long walks around airport terminals, and remember to walk up and down the plane's aisles to reduce the risk of narrowed arteries, low blood pressure, and varicose veins.

As for the workplace, make sure you have an ergonomic set up, from your chair to your keyboard, and everything in between. Better yet, investigate standing work stations and lunchtime power walks. If you are retired, walking groups and group exercise classes will not only benefit your leg health, but they will help you to keep you social and keep illnesses like dementia and Alzheimer's at bay.

Compression Socks

If you suffer from varicose veins, DVT, restless leg syndrome, or even sciatica, you know firsthand how frustrating it can be to deal with burning, itching, fatigue, leg cramps, and swelling. High-quality, cotton compression socks can help reduce these painful symptoms and slow down the various ailment's progression.

The compression socks work by promoting the venous blood flow from your feet back up towards your heart, thereby overcoming the effects of gravity. They are designed to be stronger in your feet and help to gradually diminish in pressure as they extend up your calf and thigh. They further prevent the pooling of blood in the feet and legs, improving a range of leg symptoms and decreasing the risk of blood clots.



As for when to wear compression socks, you can wear them during the day when you are up and about. You don't have to bathe with them on, and you don't need to wear them in bed, either. But, do put them on when you wake up and before even getting out of bed. If you wait until later on in the day to put your socks on, the blood will already start to pool in your lower legs, exacerbating the symptoms.

If you are lucky enough not to suffer from any of the symptoms mentioned in this book, but still want to do everything you can to prevent leg problems, wearing compression socks, along with healthy weight management, regular leg

elevation, giving up smoking, ditching the high heels, and maintaining a regular exercise routine is the way to go.

Fortunately, compressions socks are not just for grandma! Gone are the days of rubber hose and stockings. The latest fabric designs have truly revolutionized the compression clothing market and socks are now available in a wide range of styles, colors, fabrics, and lengths. Thanks to advancements in weaving mechanisms, there are now compressions socks for everything, from an evening out, to a workout at the gym, work, and just sitting on a plane!

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Pain and Stress Management

As we discussed early on in the book, stress can make pain worse, which is why it is important to find the relaxation techniques that will work best for you and act as natural pain relief. Relaxation exercises work to reduce stress hormones in the blood, relaxing your muscles, improving circulation, calming the mind, and elevating your overall sense of well-being. By using any or all of the below techniques regularly, you can look forward to long-term changes in the body to counteract the negative effects of stress.

But, don't stress yourself out trying to find the perfect relaxation technique to relieve pain – there is no “perfect” solution. Pick what relaxes you the most, be it taking a walk, cuddling the dog, walking on the phone, gardening, music, prayer, or anything else. Here are a few other techniques to try:

- Guided imagery – inhale and exhale slowly and deeply and imagine a tranquil field full of beautiful flowers and lush, green grass. It should be somewhere where you feel comfortable, relaxed, and completely safe. Include everything around you – the smells, sounds, colors, and even your feelings. Try this for just ten minutes each day.
- Foursquare breathing – breathe in and out deeply so that your stomach expands and contracts, just like a balloon. Inhale as you count to four, hold as you count to four, and then exhale to a count of four. Hold for four and then repeat in ten cycles.
- Hypnosis – a trained and reputable hypnotherapist can induce hypnosis and implant relaxation suggestions, like “you will sleep soundly.” Usually, they will give you an audio of the session so that you can continue to reap the benefits at home.
- Self-talk – you can change the way in which you think about yourself and your leg pain. For instance, instead of saying “pain prevents me from cleaning the house, I feel dirty and am a failure,” say “if the house isn't perfect, it's not going to affect anyone. I'll get more done if a break things down into smaller tasks each day.”
- Mindfulness meditation – lie or sit somewhere quiet and concentrate on your breathing. If your negative thoughts or leg pain interfere, notice them and move on. Think of them like they are a cloud passing over. Return to observing your breathing and continue for around 20 minutes or longer if you want to!



With so many ways to look after our legs, prevent, and control pain and different symptoms, we can work towards a better, or the best, quality of life possible, along with great overall health and well-being.

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Conclusion

We hope this book has given you insight and tips into managing the health of your legs. With the right products, exercises, diet, and other lifestyle changes, you can improve the circulation in your legs, increase your overall health and energy, and keep your legs in the healthiest possible condition.

Here's a re-cap of some of the best ways to keep your legs in top condition:

- After a long day, especially during the hotter months, revitalize your pins with a cool bath or shower. Extended exposure to the heat, from saunas, hot baths, and even sunbathing, causes the veins to dilate and can induce swelling.
- Try not to sit or stand for long periods of time – even on a plane. Circulation improves with physical movement, so get up and walk, climb those stairs, and try a few of the seated exercises described in the previous chapter.
- Keep working out. Regular physical activity keeps the body healthy. Sports that are great for improving circulation and reducing inflammation include walking, swimming, yoga, and cycling.
- Elevate your legs to boost circulation.
- Keep your body weight under control through regular exercise and a healthy diet and you will be less likely to have swelling and other unhealthy leg problems.
- Wear compression socks to improve venous circulation and to treat and prevent edema and other venous problems.
- Muscle relaxants can help with severe and chronic spasms.
- Physical therapy will help to retain your leg muscles.
- Acupuncture is known to help with pain relief.
- Seek a sciatic nerve block if you have sciatic leg pain.

There's one more tip we'd like to give you that we only touched on in the book – shoes – along with cotton compression sock. Your most basic piece of equipment on your road to leg health is the right pair of shoes and compression socks. Poor-quality and ill-fitting shoes can contribute to any existing leg conditions and create brand new ones. So, when you exercise to look after your legs, you need the perfect pair of shoes, or – at the very least – orthotic inserts for your current shoes.

We are blessed with a pair of legs that carries the rest of our body around day in and day out. Let's look after them. We are fortunate in that we can use the self-help tips in this book to keep our legs in healthy condition and, in turn, look after our overall health. Let's do the best we can!

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