Thrombolysis for DVT
Deep Vein Thrombosis

A deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a blood clot that forms in a deep vein. This is a serious condition that occurs more often than you might think. If not treated, a part of the clot (embolus) can travel to the lungs and cause a life-threatening complication. Over time, the clot can also permanently damage leg veins, causing ongoing leg symptoms. To protect your health, DVT must be treated right away.

Risk Factors

Anyone can get deep vein thrombosis. But the following risk factors make the condition more likely to occur:

- Being inactive for a long period (such as when you’re bedridden due to illness)
- Injury to a vein
- Family history of blood clots
- Recent surgery

Other factors such as age, pregnancy, having another vein problem, or being overweight can also put you at higher risk of DVT.

Common Symptoms

DVT does not always cause obvious symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they usually occur suddenly and in only one leg. Symptoms can include:

- Pain, especially deep in the muscle
- Swelling
- Aching or tenderness
- Red or warm skin

If you suspect that you have DVT, contact your doctor right away. He or she can evaluate your veins and recommend treatment.
How DVT Develops

The leg muscles have **deep veins**. These veins help carry blood from the legs back to the heart. When leg muscles contract and relax, blood is squeezed up the veins toward the heart. One-way **valves** located along the walls of the veins help keep blood moving upward in the right direction. They open to allow blood through, and then close so that blood doesn’t leak backward. When blood moves too slowly or not at all, it can pool in the veins. This makes a clot more likely to form.

Diagnosing DVT

Your doctor will evaluate your veins to see if you have a blood clot. This includes taking a health history and performing a physical exam. An imaging test will also be done. After the evaluation, your doctor will discuss treatment options with you.

**Health History and Physical Exam**

The doctor will ask about your symptoms and risk factors. Tell the doctor if your family has a history of vein problems and if you’ve had any blood clots, leg injuries, recent surgical procedures, or pregnancies. During the exam, the doctor will check your legs for abnormal veins and swollen or tender areas.

**Duplex Ultrasound**

Duplex ultrasound is a painless and non-invasive imaging test. It uses sound waves to create pictures of vein structures and blood flow. The test helps the doctor pinpoint the size and location of a blood clot, if you have one. During the test, the doctor will move a probe over the skin. Pictures of your veins are then viewed on a computer screen.
Complications of DVT

The body may sometimes break down a blood clot with no long-term effects. Or, a blood clot may grow large enough to block blood flow within a vein. If complications develop, these can be dangerous to health. In particular, a **pulmonary embolism (PE)** poses an immediate health threat—it can even be fatal if not treated. Seek treatment right away if you have any of the symptoms described below.

**Pulmonary Embolism**

A pulmonary embolism occurs when an embolus in the bloodstream travels through the heart and into the lungs. If the embolus becomes lodged in a blood vessel in the lungs, blood flow can be blocked. Symptoms can quickly develop and cause life-threatening heart and lung problems.

**When to Call 911**

A pulmonary embolism can cause symptoms similar to those of heart conditions. Get medical help right away if you have the following:

- Shortness of breath
- Sudden chest pain
- Fast heartbeat
- Sweating
- Fainting
- Coughing up blood

**Post-Thrombotic Syndrome**

If a blood clot remains in a vessel for some time, it can severely damage the vein. Blood can leak backward through damaged valves and pool in the vein. This can cause ongoing pain, swelling, and skin damage, resulting in a condition called post-thrombotic syndrome. If symptoms are not controlled, you can even develop open wounds on the leg called venous skin ulcers.
Thrombolysis for DVT

DVT must be treated to restore blood flow in a vein and to reduce the risk of complications. A procedure called thrombolysis can help dissolve a large clot. You’ll be told how to prepare for your procedure in advance. You may need to stay in the hospital for a day or longer. Once home, follow your doctor’s instructions for care and recovery.

During Thrombolysis

During the procedure, an IV may be placed in a vein. You’ll receive medication to help you relax and keep you from feeling pain. A catheter (thin tube) is inserted into the affected vein. Dye is injected and x-rays are taken of the vein and the clot. Then, special clot-dissolving medication is delivered directly to the clot through the catheter. In some cases, a mechanical device is used along with the medication to break up the clot.

Recovering at Home

Take care of yourself as directed by your doctor. Medications called anticoagulants will likely be prescribed to help keep you from developing more blood clots. While you recover:

- Wear elastic compression stockings or bandages as instructed.
- Elevate your legs above heart level from time to time throughout the day.
- Walk as much as possible or do other exercises as instructed by your doctor.
- Avoid immediate air travel.

Risks and Complications

- Bleeding
- Infection
- Blood clot may travel to another part of the body

When to Call the Doctor

- Increased pain, redness, swelling, or bleeding in the affected leg
- Fever
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
Protecting Your Health

DVT is a serious condition that can even be life-threatening. But early treatment greatly reduces your risk of complications. Your doctor will work with you to make sure you receive the best care. After treatment, do as you’re told by your doctor to improve vein health. For instance, staying active can help keep blood moving and may prevent you from developing more blood clots in the future.