

There's no need to put up with unsightly thread veins and painful varicose veins, especially when the latest treatments are so quick and simple

If you're a reader of celeb mags, you may recall a paparazzi shot of Clint Eastwood widely published several years ago. In it, Clint was pictured at the poolside, looking pretty fit for a man in his 70s – buff chest, manly arms. Until that is, you looked below the shorts line. Because there, in place of the expected muscular legs, was a mass of ridges and knots snaking up from ankle to knees like a forest in winter. Yes, The Man With No Name had a bad case of varicose veins.

Why we were all surprised, is a surprise in itself. Perhaps we just don't expect such a mundane condition to afflict our stars. But in fact, varicose veins are an extremely common condition, affecting 20% of us at some point in our lives and often making life quite miserable for the sufferer.

Like many conditions, varicose veins can be treated easily and with the minimum of fuss if caught early. The problem is that many of us don't recognise the symptoms until they become quite severe.

"Symptoms of varicose veins tend to come on slowly, over months and years," says vascular specialist and surgeon Michael Gaunt. "For example, you might notice your legs getting tired and achy. Or you may start to see patches of thread veins appear on your legs.

"Quite often, varicose veins are diagnosed when a patient seeks treatment

for unsightly patches of thread veins. Ultrasound often reveals that the underlying problem is varicose veins and unless we treat these we can't successfully get rid of the thread veins."

Mr Gaunt is keen to dispel the many myths surrounding the condition.

"People often believe it's a disease of middle age," he says, "but my youngest patient so far has been just nine years old. Others think it's a disease of weight, or of pregnancy, or the result of a sedentary lifestyle but I've treated top athletes for the condition."

The truth is that if you are destined to get varicose veins, you'll get them, whatever your lifestyle.

"They tend to run in families, though they are not strictly inherited," he says. "In the end it comes down to a combination of genetic propensity and environmental factors."

While that may seem a gloomy outlook if you've just noticed the first thread veins appear at the back of your knees, the good news is that new,

advanced treatments mean that varicose veins are much easier to treat than in the past.

The conventional treatment for severe varicose veins, and the one still commonly offered to sufferers on the NHS, and only when the condition has become extremely severe, is "stripping." Under this procedure, a small cut is made in the groin and the vein quite literally "stripped out." Further small incisions are made along the length of where the vein ran to remove the remaining "branches."

"It's a good treatment," says Mr Gaunt, "and certainly solves the problem of a varicose vein but there are drawbacks."

The procedure is performed under general anaesthetic as either an inpatient or as a day case but after effects include bruising, scarring, the real possibility of a groin infection and even nerve damage leading to numbness and pain.

Usually the patient requires several weeks off work after the operation.

The newest **Endovenous Laser therapy** on the other hand avoids nearly all these complications. There is no cut in the groin and the majority of procedures can be carried out under local anaesthetic.

"With Endovenous Laser there is no incision," explains Mr Gaunt. "Instead we simply puncture the vein and pass a tiny wire, and alongside it a laser, down the length of the vein. Then we apply pulses of laser energy as we pull them back up again. This destroys the inner lining of the vein and seals it up. The vein is left as a fibrous cord which is eventually assimilated back into the body.

"It's a walk-in walk-out treatment which leaves minimal scarring. There is very little internal bleeding and the patient usually returns to normal life within a day or two. There is also less pain. One recent study found that 70% of patients needed no pain relief after leaving hospital."

The best thing though, says Mr Gaunt, is just how much his patients' lives are changed for the better.

From the young mum, who sought help distraught when her new stepdaughter asked her why she had "worms living in her legs" to the office worker able to compete in the company tennis tournament for the first time, or the top athlete whose performance was improved after the procedure cured his tired, aching legs and he was able to train harder.

In one of Mr Gaunt's most ▶



WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF VARICOSE VEINS?

- Tired, aching legs
- Legs tired after sport
- Patches of thread veins
- Bulging veins
- Night cramps (one of the most constant symptoms)
- Discolouration of the skin on the inside ankle
- The skin turns leathery and brown
- Phlebitis (where a clot forms inside the vein causing it to become hot, red and infected)
- Venous ulcer (50 per cent of venous ulcers are caused as a direct result of varicose veins)

LEG work

WHAT CAUSES VARICOSE VEINS?

So how do varicose veins come about, and why are they usually found in the legs? The answer, simply put, is gravity. The arteries carry blood at high pressure to all parts of the bodies, distributing oxygen and essential nutrients to the muscles and major organs. Once it has done its work, the blood, now carrying a load of waste deposits is sent back to the heart for recycling.

By the time it reaches our feet however, blood pressure has all but disappeared and the blood is returned up the veins by the efforts of the heart and lungs and actions such as walking which help squeeze the blood back up the veins. Inside, each vein comprises lots of tiny compartments, separated by valves. It is here that the problems start when these valves fail to work properly allowing blood to collect and forming what we know as 'varicose' veins.

► satisfying cases, he was asked to write a medical report on a man who was suing his company for a venous ulcer triggered by an accident at work. Mr Gaunt noted underlying varicose veins and sent off the report. Two years later he was contacted by a High Court judge. The case had taken a turn for the worse, the man's condition had considerably worsened and he was facing amputation. Could anything be done?

"I walked into the room and there was a huge pool of pus around the man's leg. He was in tears and on morphine for the pain," says Mr Gaunt. "He needed knee replacements but couldn't have them because of MRSA caused by the ulcer. He'd had 37 skin grafts but all had failed. He needed a cataract operation but that couldn't be done either because of his medical condition. He was in a terrible state.

"We treated his varicose veins and 15 months later his ulcer healed. He had his knee replacements, his cataract removed and was heading off on holiday. Getting his veins treated truly changed his life!"

Fortunately not all cases are so extreme but if you feel you may be having problems, seek help sooner rather than later.

If you have private health insurance, your policy should hopefully cover varicose vein surgery. If you don't, the cost is roughly in line with what you might pay for laser eye surgery. And if you would spend that on your eyes, why not on your legs which carry you around all day?

■ Michael Gaunt consults and operates from the BMI Hospital in Bury St Edmunds and also from two hospitals in Cambridge. For more information, visit his website on www.michaelgaunt.com or ring 01223 305858.



Confessions of a THERAPIST

I often think the best thing someone can watch when they are depressed is a kitten. Their crazy antics are hilarious and when they've finally worn themselves out and snuggled up on your lap, just stroking a cat has its own therapeutic benefits.

However, it's not so much the kitten but the fun factor that is so good for you. Whether it's a little giggle or a deep belly ache laugh, the theory behind laughter therapy is the same.

Laughter releases bursts of stress-busting endorphins into your blood stream. These are your body's natural painkillers which leave you feeling relaxed and happy. Laughter can also be a great muscle workout and it increases the amount of oxygen in your blood.

What is more, you don't even have to have a real laugh. Our bodies are unable to tell the difference between a real laugh and a fake one, which means faking it, has the same beneficial effects. Marvellous!

So why not give it a go now? Start with a little chuckle and build to a big bellowing guffaw. Try to keep it up for 20 seconds. I bet you feel really silly now, but hopefully a lot happier.

If I told you that research had proved that just 20 seconds of laughter could be as good for your lungs as three minutes spent on a rowing machine you may not feel so daft.

It is also true that laughter increases your natural immunity cells that attack virus and tumour cells. So who's laughing now?

Of course, as with all therapies there are a few contra-indications (conditions that prevent the therapy being recommended). Laughing after surgery is definitely out. It's a case of not being in stitches while you've got stitches, or it really could turn out to be side splitting.

Others who are banned from rolling-on-the-floor laughter are those suffering with glaucoma, hernias or haemorrhoids.

Heavily pregnant ladies must also remain straight faced. However, when my first baby was two weeks over due (no laughing matter), friends recommended curries, hot baths and castor oil, but not one mentioned watching *Only Fools and Horses* or *Harry Hill's TV Burp*.

The other great thing about laughter is that it is contagious and once

one person starts to chuckle anyone else nearby will giggle too, even though they may not know what they're laughing at. Different things are funny to different people, so find out what makes you smile. It may be a funny film, a comedian, a poem or a joke. It might just be watching and listening to your children or grandchildren. Children laugh on average 400 times a day whereas adults only manage about 15, so even if their childlike expressions don't have the sides of your mouth twitching, maybe the infectious nature of their laughter will do the trick for you.

I love the things that children say. Just the other day my daughter was talking about the dinosaurs on *Drastic Park*. It sounded a much scarier place than *Jurassic Park*. Elderly people also hold a wealth of humour. My grandma used to go on holiday to Super Western on a Mare; she had a Dragalong (Dralon) sofa; and used deo-dorant to stay fresh!

But the best one recently, was from my would-be-mother-in-law who stated that people were such a nuisance because they only telephoned her when it was convenient for them!

More subtle than laughter therapy is positive thinking and positive talking. It is equally contagious and just as potent.

We've all had times when we've sat down with girlfriends and had a good old moan about life and those in it. But afterwards, did you feel better for getting it off your chest or for sharing your sorrows with others? I know I didn't. I just felt worse.

They say a problem shared is a problem halved, but what if it's a problem doubled? What if talking about doom and gloom just reinforces it.

Russell Grant once told me through my 'stars' (and it was definitely directed at me and not any of the other millions of Cancerians) that it was a law of the universe that what you focus on expands and what you ignore contracts.

So I decided to put this to the test, and the next time we had a girls' night out I

declared that my children were wonderful, my love life was blooming and my business was booming. It may have seemed a little far-fetched at the time but today it's a reality. I guess some things in life don't need a logical explanation.

By Helen Skene
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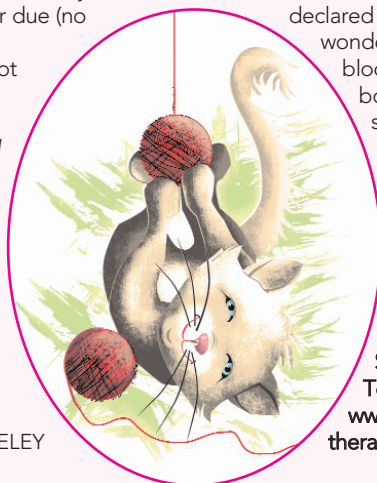


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