

VESSELS

IN DISTRESS

The blood vessels in the legs end up doing a lot of hard work – so be nice to your legs and feet!



Text by Ming E Wong

The heart may be the engine of the body, but our blood vessels are the turbines that power it – ferrying an incredible 7,000 litres of blood throughout our body every day.

The hardest work is performed by the vessels in our legs – they have to work against the pull of gravity. Our calf muscles are like pumps pushing the blood upwards toward our heart. If the muscle pumps no longer work properly, the blood is likely to collect in our legs.

Many people do not even notice their veins are acting up until they feel pain or see some purplish veins or ankle swelling. This is more evident in the evenings at the end of a long day, so people often put it down to tiredness, which might be the case as well. Usually the veins get some relief while we sleep, but if leg pains or cramps persist or if you have chronic leg fatigue, then you should do something about it.

Other symptoms include spider veins or varicose veins, swelling (technically known as oedema) and excessive accumulation of fluid in the tissues. Besides painful spasmodic cramps, vein infections, tiny blood clots, thrombosis, coagulation or pulmonary embolism may also result.

Vein problems are quite frequent in Singapore. Sometimes there are genetic factors, but hormonal factors, age and

lifestyle often come into play. Ask yourself if you smoke, are desk-bound for many hours a day or are overweight. If your answer is “yes”, they may be part of the reason for your painful, tired legs.

Here are some lifestyle habits to help keep your legs in top form:

Move it or lose it

Sports such as swimming and bicycling – but also stretching, walking, yoga or even housework – keep you moving, which is good for the body. However, when doing housework, do beware of prolonged ironing, which moves the arms but not the feet.

Prolonged sitting is perhaps the new “smoking” of our time: not only is it dangerous for your health, but it can also create a rift in your social landscape by reducing interpersonal interactions. So do not just email, Skype or put in too much face-time at your screen: take breaks to stretch your legs and walk over to your colleagues – mingle!



Practise proper posture

Some may find it more comfortable to cross their legs when sitting, but a better position is to sit with both feet resting flat on the ground, with thighs and calves at a right angle to each other.

You can exercise your feet even while sitting and engaged in activities such as clearing your emails, taking calls or attending meetings. Roll your feet forwards and backwards, toward the toes and then back to raise on heels. If you have the space, stretch one leg forward while sitting and draw increasingly larger circles with it, first in one direction, then the other. Repeat with the other leg.

DON'T PUT IN TOO MUCH FACE-TIME AT YOUR SCREEN: REMEMBER TO TAKE BREAKS TO STRETCH YOUR LEGS

Do standing leg exercises

Stand with legs slightly apart and stretch your arms horizontally in front of you. Go on your haunches into a stooping position and hold for a few seconds. Then return to original position and repeat. Or hold the stork position: lift your knees to 90 degrees and stand on one foot. Remember to keep your back straight.

Watch the weight

Your extra kilos are a burden on your hips and legs. Not only will you take longer to recover from a sprain, fall or fracture, you are also less likely to move during sleep, which creates another set of problems.

Keep hydrated

We need at least one to two litres of water a day to help keep our blood diluted and our body functioning smoothly.

Wear feet-friendly shoes

Wearing high heels over an extended time can give rise to abnormal arches of the feet, which can affect blood circulation. Choose flexible soles that support the muscles in your feet for better foot health.

Get your feet wet

No, we do not just mean during a shower, but treat them to footbaths – alternate soaking your feet in warm and cold water, ending with cold. This external stimulation will aid in blood flow. Go easy on the hot baths and saunas – heat causes swelling in your feet.

Put your feet up

You can do this when you watch TV or read. At night, sleep with your feet on a pillow higher than your head. Think of your body in bed as a slightly wider “V”.

Dress sensibly

We have all heard by now of the woman whose skinny jeans landed her in hospital for a couple of days. She reportedly spent hours squatting to do some packing and as a result, her blood vessels and nerves were compressed. Usually, muscles can expand to compensate for the swelling, but the jeans were so tight that the muscles expanded inwards and she lost circulation in her lower legs. Do not be a fashion victim.

Use compression hosiery

Compression hosiery are finely woven stockings with maximum compression at the ankle that gradually decreases up the leg. They also create a massaging effect as you move. If you spend a lot of time on your feet or are taking a long-distance flight, compression hosiery can help to prevent deep vein thrombosis. Such hosiery can be found at pharmacies and even come in fashionable colours.

Play “footsie”

Sit on a stool or low chair and attempt to turn the page of a newspaper on the floor with your toes/foot. You can also try crunching or uncrunching a piece of paper or simply tearing it up with your feet. The point is to keep your toes nimble. 📄

The information above should not be used as an alternative to medical advice from a professional healthcare provider. If you are suffering from any prolonged or unusual leg pain, please consult your doctor or other healthcare professional.

Ming E Wong is a guidebook and textbook author and freelance writer. An avid traveller and football fan, she believes that passion and enthusiasm for one's work, interests and relationships keep us healthy, as does drinking freshly squeezed lemon juice mixed with warm water and honey every morning.