- Varicose veins



WHAT'S UP WITH...

VARICOSE VEINS

Those prominent snaky leg squiggles can crop up on anyone. Here's what they are and what you can do about them.

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GETTY IMAGES.

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IF YOU FIND YOURSELF wearing long pants even on the hottest days to hide the road map of bulging blue veins on your legs, you're one of an estimated 23% of U.S. adults with varicose veins. These ropy blood vessels can be genetic but are more likely due to lifestyle factors. And though your mom might have told you crossing your legs would make them develop, that's not quite true.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE VARICOSE VEINS?

"These veins protrude from under the skin surface and may appear ropy or as grapelike clusters," explains Jodi Schoenhaus, D.P.M., a podiatrist and vein specialist at the Foot, Ankle & Leg Vein Center in Boca Raton, FL. They're related to spider veins, smaller blood vessels that look like webs of thin red or purple veins, notes Sara Hogan, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences. While they can sometimes appear in the groin or thigh area, varicose veins most commonly show up on the lower half of the leg and behind the knee, and they may be accompanied by symptoms including fatigue, aching, heaviness in the legs, and itching.

What causes the blue bulges?

Blame it on a backup of blood flow from the feet to the heart. "When there is increased pressure within veins, over time the vein walls can weaken, and the valves—flaps of tissue that act as one-way doors—can become less efficient," Dr. Hogan says. This results in pooling of blood and stretching of veins; it can be triggered by pregnancy, hormonal changes, weight gain, lack of physical activity, or standing on your feet all day. Crossing your legs may make varicose veins worse but won't cause them.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT THEM?

Wearing compression socks can improve the circulation in your legs and keep varicose veins in check. However, getting rid of them may require a vein ablation or sclerotherapy injections, says Schoenhaus. When left untreated, they can lead to skin changes such as discoloration, skin ulceration, and edema; see a doctor if you're concerned. To avoid getting them, quit smoking, maintain a healthy weight, and take frequent breaks from standing.

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