



September 2008

Sue Ann Says: Your Legs Are Talking. Listen Up to Stay Healthy!

At the beach this summer, my granddaughter was gleefully burying me in buckets of sand. As she reached out to brush it away, she traced her finger around a big, juicy varicose vein in my leg. "What's this blue thing, ya ya?" she wondered (that is what my grandkids call me). I was a little chagrined, but I figure after all those decades of standing in front of a classroom of kids, I've earned those veins. I explained that it carries blood from my toes to my heart. Of course, Ellie asked why. (Did I mention that she is five?)

Ellie's innocent question aroused my curiosity, so I called Sandra Carr, a vascular surgeon and director of the Comprehensive Vein Care Center at the Wisconsin Heart and Vascular Institute based in Madison. (www.wiheart.com) She told me that those little blue lines all over our legs are a roadmap of our overall health. Like many women, I just accepted that I was going to develop those pesky veins as I got older, and I ignored them when they hurt. But they can be a sign of serious trouble, Dr. Carr said.

Our arteries carry oxygen-rich blood from our heart to the rest of our body. Our veins carry the oxygen-depleted blood from the body back to the heart for a recharge. But sometimes the veins or the arteries don't work the way they're supposed to. Dr. Carr then told me about a few things that can go wrong:

Venous disease

Those teensy little "spider veins" close to the surface of the skin are the most common type of vein disease. Usually no more than a cosmetic problem, they are caused by hormonal changes and heredity.

Varicose veins, which usually appear in the legs, are enlarged and twisted or ropey. Symptoms include aches, swelling, itching or numbness and usually worsen with prolonged standing. (I call it school teacher's disease). Varicose veins aren't likely to cause any serious health issues unless blood circulation is impaired. They can be treated with surgery, injection or laser therapy.

Deep vein thrombosis is a serious condition caused by a blood clot in a vein deep within the body. It usually appears in the leg and can form after prolonged sedentary activity. About half the time there are no symptoms, but you might have swelling, pain and redness. This is a life threatening situation if the clot breaks off and travels to the heart or lungs. Risk factors include surgery, prolonged inactivity, smoking, obesity, pregnancy and an inherited blood-clotting disorder. Deep vein thrombosis typically is treated with blood thinners.

Peripheral artery disease

Peripheral artery disease (PAD) is caused by plaque building up in the wall of an artery, thus reducing blood flow. Sometimes a clot forms, further blocking the artery. If muscles don't get enough blood when they're working, we might feel cramping, pain or tiredness in the leg, hip or buttocks muscles. As the disease progresses, it can cause blue or reddish feet and toes, sores that don't heal, fragile-looking skin, and numbness or tingling. Dr. Carr cautioned that I was at increased risk for PAD because of my age. Other risk factors are smoking, high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

People with PAD are more likely to have a heart attack or stroke, and restricted blood flow to the legs can lead to skin ulcers and tissue death. Dr. Carr said this serious disease frequently goes undiagnosed because symptoms tend to come on gradually. We often dismiss them as a normal part of aging or mistake them for other conditions. If you have any kind of recurring leg pain or cramping, talk with your doctor right away. PAD can be managed through medication and lifestyle changes.

Staying healthy

Although many of these problems arise through the natural course of a woman's life – pregnancy, aging, hormonal changes – Dr. Carr told me there is plenty we can do to control our risk factors.

- The health of your legs mirrors the health of your entire vascular system. Your toes are purple or blue? You have cramping or pain? See your doctor!
- Don't smoke! Smoking increases risk of blood clots.
- Maintain a healthy weight to avoid extra stress on the legs.
- Stick to a healthy low-fat diet and watch your cholesterol, especially if you have a family history of heart disease.
- Exercise your legs and stay hydrated to improve circulation
- If you know you have vascular issues, wear compression stockings when taking a long plane flight.

Many hospitals and specialty clinics offer free health screenings, including an ankle-brachial index. This painless test measures your blood pressure to detect artery narrowing or blockages. Listen to your legs and let your doctor know what they are saying. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder and president
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

Memo to Ellie: If you think it's cool to have blue or purple toes, please just use nail polish.

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.