

Superficial Thrombophlebitis

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What Is Superficial Thrombophlebitis?

Superficial thrombophlebitis occurs when there is inflammation of a vein just under the skin, usually in the leg. A small blood clot also commonly forms in the vein, but is usually not serious (thrombosed). Inflammation in the vein often occurs after an injury (eg a knock to the vein) but may occur without any injury. The condition usually settles and goes within 2-6 weeks, although the thrombosed vein may be palpable and tender for months.

Phlebitis means inflammation of a vein.

Thrombosis means a blood clot in a vein.

What Are The Symptoms Of Superficial Thrombophlebitis?

Symptoms usually present as redness, pain and swelling of the skin overlying the vein and there may be localized oedema (swelling). The vein is very tender to the touch and feels like a hard cord. If a varicose vein is thrombosed it feels like a knot under the skin. The blood clot is usually of little concern as it is small. There are other veins that carry the blood and bypass the blocked vein.

When the inflammation settles, a persistent darker area of skin may remain over the affected vein. A small hard lump may also persist under the skin and may be tender to the touch for some time.

Out Of Hours

A&E Department, Southport & Formby DGH

Tel: 01704 704128

Further information can be found at:

- Department of Health www.dh.gov.uk/vte
- Patient.co.uk www.patient.co.uk/health/Phlebitis.htm

Symptoms To Be Aware Of

- Inflammation, redness or hardness spreads.
- Your whole leg swells.
- Pain becomes much worse.
- You develop any breathing problems, chest pains or cough up blood

This patient information leaflet is intended to be used to support discussion during your clinical consultation.

If there is anything you do not understand or are unsure about, please ask the doctor at your appointment or contact the people below:

Lynn Hooton, VTE and Anticoagulation Nurse Specialist

Tel: 01704 704388 or Ascom 3803

What Causes Superficial Thrombophlebitis?

In many cases it can occur for no apparent reason, but in some cases a slight injury to the vein may cause inflammation

Risk Factors

There are some risk factors that may make it more likely for inflammation to develop in a vein:-

- **Previous Vein Problems** – where people have had previous superficial thrombophlebitis or previous Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT).
- **Varicose Veins**
- **Chronic Venous Insufficiency** – a condition in which the blood returning to the heart from the leg veins is sluggish, causing chronic pooling of fluid and leg swelling.
- **Obesity**
- **Pregnancy**
- **Abnormalities of Blood Clotting Factors** – various conditions can alter clotting factors in the blood which can make the blood clot more easily. These may include people suffering with cancer, use of oral contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy and smoking. There are also some hereditary clotting factors where blood clots can develop more easily.
- **Stasis (blood flowing more slowly than normal)** – this might occur in varicose veins, people who are older, immobile, following major surgery and after long journeys.

Which Investigations Are Required To Prove Superficial Thrombophlebitis?

In most cases an Ultrasound Scan will be performed, which will show where the clot is within the vein and also exclude any involvement in the deep veins.

Is Superficial Thrombophlebitis Dangerous?

In itself, it is not dangerous. It is important however to ensure the clot does not propagate (extend) or move to involve other deep veins. Blood clots that involve deep veins in the leg.

(DVT – Deep Vein Thrombosis) can often grow and “travel” to other parts of the body (eg lungs). A blood clot that only involves the surface or superficial veins, rarely travels to other parts of the body.

What Is The Treatment For Superficial Thrombophlebitis?

The treatment is normally a course of four up to six weeks of low molecular weight heparin, or tablets called Apixaban, which is often described as a “blood thinning” treatment. You will be discharged home with this treatment and asked to return at regular intervals for review and reassessment. This treatment has been shown to reduce the symptoms and also prevent clots developing in the deep veins. The use of low molecular weight heparin however, may not be suitable in some cases due to risk of bleeding. This will be discussed with the Doctor or Specialist Practitioner.

Alternatively, in some cases, if appropriate, anti-inflammatory tablets or creams may be used. A heparinoid type cream may sometimes be used to ease symptoms. It is very important in all cases to keep as active as possible and elevate legs when at rest.

Complications From Superficial Thrombophlebitis

In some rarer cases, the blood clot can extend further up the vein. If the clot extends to where the superficial and deep veins join, a DVT may develop. This is more likely to occur when the problem area is in the upper thigh or groin, near to where the superficial and deep veins meet. There is a similar point in the crease at the back of the knee. It is also more likely to occur if the superficial thrombophlebitis develops if you have had a previous DVT or have been immobile.