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There's no need to suffer in vein

BY CLARE DIGHT

FIFTY per cent of women over 40 have problems with varicose or thread veins and if you are a secretary or PA, your job might be making the problem worse, according to Philip Bull, a consultant surgeon.

“The cause of varicose veins is not known,” he explains, “but the hereditary factor is thought to be the main one. If your parents had them, you are 60 per cent likely to suffer. Immobility, lack of exercise and obesity exacerbates the condition which is much more common among women than men.”

This is bad news if your job requires you to stand or sit behind a desk for long periods every day. Varicose veins are abnormal, dilated blood vessels caused by a weakening in the vessel wall that allows blood to flow the wrong way. The symptoms range from a feeling of heaviness and a dull ache to unsightly lumps, swelling, itchiness and skin discolouration. Thread veins, which appear like a spider's web of red lines, especially around the knees, can be covered up by foundation or thick tights. Varicose veins often require surgical intervention.

The conventional operative procedure, vein stripping, requires a general or spinal anaesthetic. An incision of 3-4cm is made in the groin or behind the knee to find the guilty vein. Through ultrasound, the route is tracked and incisions made along the leg. The vein is then tied at the points where its branches meet the main vein, so it effectively dies. Each section is then removed through the incisions. Patients typically need two weeks off work and a full recovery can take some months. Scarring can be a problem.

Now, however, there is a less invasive procedure, more suited to a busy lifestyle. EndoVenous Laser Treatment (EVLT) was developed in America and approved for use in the NHS by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence this year.

EVLT involves inserting a laser head into a small incision via a guide wire above or below the knee at the closest point to the vein. The guide wire is removed leaving the laser head in place. The head is then slowly withdrawn, flashing once a second to kill the vein through thermal injury. The procedure is carried out under local anaesthetic and takes about 20 minutes per leg.

Philip Bull believes that the new procedure is better for patients. “After EVLT the vein becomes hard to the touch and the patient may experience some redness and tenderness for some weeks, but it is not painful. The patient can walk around, travel and resume normal activities after only a two-hour stay in hospital to ensure the local anaesthetic has been absorbed.” He advises patients to wear compression stockings for four to six weeks after surgery.

The procedure won't suit everybody. About 10 per cent will not benefit if they have had prior surgery for the same problem vein or suffer from thrombosis.

One person who successfully underwent the therapy, however, was Helen Cliffin, 34. She had the treatment when she became increasingly aware that her varicose veins were affecting her confidence and, because she was finding them painful, her day-to-day activity.

Helen's family has a history of varicose veins but she didn't worry about it until she became pregnant at 29 and her veins worsened significantly. She ignored them as she was so busy. When she was pregnant again at 32, her legs felt constantly tired and heavy. After the birth of her second child, she became embarrassed about her legs and stopped wearing skirts. She was advised to take regular walks and keep her legs elevated but found this did not help. She sought surgery and was relieved to find it unnecessary.

Her EVLT treatment involved two 40-minute sessions. "There was no pain, and it was easy and quick," she says. Helen had her treatment at the Private Patients Services clinic in London. A consultation costs £150 and the therapy from £1,200.

Information, 0845 8504050; specific inquiries, 020-7323 2123.

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