

# A guide to preventing blood clots



## What can I do to reduce the risk of a blood clot?

When you are unwell at home or in hospital (including recovering from an operation), it is important for you to move about when it is safe to do so. If you have difficulty moving around, you should move your toes, calf and leg muscles frequently, even if your leg is injured or in a cast.

It is also important to keep well hydrated. Ask your doctor how much you can drink.

## What are the signs and symptoms of a blood clot?

If you experience any of the following symptoms during an illness, during a hospital stay or recovery at home, seek urgent medical advice at an Emergency Department or fracture clinic:

- pain or swelling in the leg;
- the skin on your leg becomes hot or discoloured (red, purple or blue);
- if you have a fractured leg, then any increase in pain or swelling, which does not settle when you elevate your leg for a period;
- your feet are numb or tingling;
- the veins near the surface of your legs appear larger than normal or you notice them more;
- you become short of breath;
- pain in your chest, back or ribs, which gets worse when you breathe in deeply;
- you cough up blood.

## Where can I get more information?

The following healthcare professionals can provide you with further information or answer any questions you may have:

- the doctors and nurses looking after you in hospital;
- your Emergency Department or fracture clinic staff;
- your GP;
- your pharmacist;
- your physiotherapist;
- your practice nurse or district nurse.

## Other useful contacts

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence  
[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

Lifeblood: the thrombosis charity  
[www.thrombosis-charity.org.uk](http://www.thrombosis-charity.org.uk)  
Tel: 01558 650 222



Public Health Agency, 12–22 Linenhall Street,  
Belfast BT2 8BS. Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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## What is a blood clot?

When you are inactive for a period of time, blood tends to collect in the lower parts of your body, often in the lower leg. This makes your blood move around your body more slowly, which can trigger a blood clot (also known as thrombus) to form and may block your veins.

Blood clots are more common in people who are unable to move freely, either due to continuing health problems or for temporary reasons such as taking a long journey, having an operation, being in bed with illness, having a leg cast or needing to use a wheelchair.

When a clot forms in one of the deep veins in your leg, thigh, pelvis or arm it is known as a deep vein thrombosis (DVT). The blood clot may cause long-term damage to your veins. If the clot comes loose, it can be carried to your lungs where it can cause a pulmonary embolism and this can be life threatening.

It is important that you understand why you may be at risk, what can be done to reduce your risk and also how to recognise the signs of a blood clot.

## Why am I at risk of a blood clot?

There are certain things that may make you more likely to develop a blood clot around the time of an illness, operation or hospital admission.

Risk factors for developing blood clots:

- you or a member of your family has had a blood clot before;
- you are having an operation (note: you may be at even greater risk if you take a long journey in the four weeks before or after your operation);
- your ability to move is impaired for any reason;
- you are over 60 years of age;
- you are overweight;
- you have long-standing problems with your heart and lungs;
- you have had a recent heart attack or stroke;
- you have cancer or have had recent chemotherapy;
- you are on the combined pill, take hormone replacement therapy (HRT), are pregnant or have given birth within the last six weeks;
- you have inflamed varicose veins;
- you have a disorder that makes your blood more likely to clot;
- you have certain other health problems, eg some types of infections, inflammatory bowel disease or rheumatic conditions.

## What methods may be used to reduce my risk of a blood clot?

The risk factors you have will help your healthcare professional decide which preventative methods to use on you. If you also have an increased risk of bleeding, that may determine which method is chosen.

- **Compression stockings**

These are elasticated stockings specially designed to reduce the risk of blood clots. The stockings gently squeeze your feet and legs, helping your blood to move around your body more quickly.

It is important to wear the stockings correctly until you are back to your usual level of activity.

- **Inflatable Compression Devices (ICDs)**

These go around your legs (and sometimes feet) and inflate automatically at regular intervals.

When inflated, they apply pressure which keeps your blood moving around your body.

- **Anticoagulants**

These medicines can be used to prevent clots from forming and can be given as an injection under your skin or as a tablet. The drug normally prescribed in Northern Ireland is Heparin, which is given by injection. Heparin is of animal (porcine) origin so if you have any concerns about using animal products, please alert your doctor and he or she will discuss your other options.