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## Common Vascular Disorder Can Have Serious Complications

In addition to providing information about heart disease and stroke, the American Heart Association is a resource for many kinds of vascular diseases. One such condition, deep vein thrombosis (DVT), affects up to 2 million Americans each year. In fact, the AHA points out that more people suffer from DVT annually than heart attack and stroke. DVT is responsible for up to 600,000 hospitalizations every year in this country. It is the second most common vascular problem in the United States, after varicose veins. Although it occurs most often in people over age 60, anyone can develop this condition.

Exactly what is DVT? A thrombosis is a blood clot. Clots occur when the body attempts to prevent bleeding from injury by thickening the blood into a semisolid state. Unlike superficial clots that are closer to the skin, DVT is a blood clot that forms in the veins found deep in the body, usually in the leg and hip veins. While superficial clots do not travel to other parts of the body, a deep vein thrombosis can break off and travel through the bloodstream. If the clot lodges in the lung, it becomes a pulmonary embolism, a very serious condition that can cause death. More people die in the United States every year from a pulmonary embolism than from breast cancer and AIDS combined -- about 200,000 individuals.

Although anyone can develop blood clots, pregnant women, people who are overweight, and those suffering with certain blood conditions are at a greater risk. As with most conditions, a number of factors can increase a person's chance of developing DVT:

- Inheriting a condition that results in increased risk for clotting;
- Cancer and its treatment;
- Low blood flow resulting from surgery, being immobilized, or injury;
- Use of birth control pills or hormone therapy;
- Giving birth, especially during the first 6 postpartum weeks;
- Other medical conditions, including varicose veins;
- Being overweight;
- Being over age 60;
- Having diabetes;
- Having a prior history of thrombosis;
- Sitting for prolonged periods of time, such as in cars and airplanes during travel.

When a person has several of the above risk factors, the likelihood of developing DVT is greatly increased than when only one risk factor is present. Unfortunately, only about one-half of those with DVT have symptoms. Typical symptoms of DVT include swelling in the leg, one leg that is warm to the touch, red or discolored skin, and pain or tenderness in one leg only, especially when standing or walking.

If anyone has any of these symptoms, it is important that a physician is consulted immediately. An examination and tests such as an ultrasound or an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) provide pictures

of the vein that help diagnose DVT. Once diagnosed, this disorder may be treated with medications that can inhibit the body's ability to clot, or that can dissolve the blood clot. Sometimes, a filter may be inserted into the vein to prevent clots from traveling to the lungs. A doctor may also prescribe compression stockings.

When a person is in a position that can increase the risk of developing deep vein thrombosis, the risk can be lowered by exercising the lower leg muscles, getting out of bed and moving around as soon as possible after surgery, injury, or illness, and taking medication prescribed by the doctor. In addition, drinking plenty of fluids, avoiding alcohol, wearing loose clothing, avoiding crossing the legs, and eating a snack can be helpful in fending off DVT.

Interested readers can learn more about deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism by contacting the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at 301-592-8573 ([www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)). Further information is available on line at the Coalition to Prevent Deep Vein Thrombosis web site, [www.preventdvt.org](http://www.preventdvt.org), and the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons at [www.orthoinfo.aaos.org](http://www.orthoinfo.aaos.org) (847-823-7186). To obtain information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822 ([www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org)).