

## What should I do next?

Even if you don't have exactly the symptoms described in this leaflet, if you have any concerns about the condition of your legs or feet you should have them professionally assessed. In the first instance, speak to your doctor, nurse or local Leg Club, who will give you a thorough examination. This may include a full health check and review of the circulation in your legs.

## What is a Leg Club?

Leg Clubs are a research-based initiative which provide community-based treatment, health promotion, education and ongoing care for people of all age groups who are experiencing leg-related problems.

The Leg Club nursing teams are employed by NHS local provider services, CCGs and GP consortia and the nurses incorporate the Leg Clubs into their everyday practice.

No appointment is required and the Leg Club opening hours should be available from the local surgery, community nurses' office, and adverts in the local parish magazine and village shops or from the Leg Club website [www.legclub.org](http://www.legclub.org)

Through education, ongoing advice and support from your Leg Club nurses, you will be made aware that care and prevention of recurrence of leg-related problems is for life.

The information contained within this leaflet has been adapted with permission from Professor Mark Whiteley MS FRCS(Gen) FCPleb at the Whiteley Clinics ([www.whiteleyclinics.co.uk](http://www.whiteleyclinics.co.uk)).

## Visit your nearest Leg Club

The Lindsay Leg Club Foundation  
Ipswich, PO Box 689, IP1 9BN

Telephone  
**01473 749565**

Email:  
[lynn.bullock@legclubfoundation.com](mailto:lynn.bullock@legclubfoundation.com)

[www.legclub.org](http://www.legclub.org)

# Phlebitis




Leg Club Industry Partners



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## What is phlebitis?

The word phlebitis is made up of two parts:

- 'Phleb' – meaning 'vein'
- 'Itis' – which is usually put on the end of a medical word to mean 'inflammation'

Thus, 'phlebitis' simply means inflammation in the veins. Inflammation is the body's natural reaction to a blood clot and is the way clots are removed naturally.

## Phlebitis of the legs

Phlebitis, also known as superficial thrombophlebitis, is most frequently associated with varicose veins or hidden varicose veins.

Firstly, we need to understand why the clot occurs in these veins. In normal leg veins, blood flows up the veins when pumped by the foot or leg muscles during exercise. When the leg is not exercising, the blood starts to fall down the leg and is stopped by valves.

In people with varicose veins or hidden varicose veins, these valves have stopped working. Blood is still pumped up the veins normally on movement but when the leg relaxes, the blood falls down the leg veins due to gravity. The valves are said to be 'incompetent' and the blood is moving or 'refluxing' in the opposite direction to normal.



Images used courtesy of the Whiteley Clinics

This backward flow increases the amount of blood in the leg veins and, after a few years, some of the vein walls weaken and start dilating. If these dilated veins are seen on the surface, they are called 'varicose veins'. Even if they are too deep to be seen, they will act like any visible varicose veins.

When blood clots within a vein, it is called a 'thrombosis'. When a thrombosis occurs within a vein, it irritates the wall, setting into action a chain of events resulting in inflammation of the vein wall and surrounding tissue. This inflammation is nature's way of trying to heal the clot or thrombosis. Inflammation increases the local blood supply and brings white blood cells to the area, which will eat away the clot.

Phlebitis is usually a more annoying than serious condition. The blood clot and inflammation generally disappear within a few weeks. It may be painful but should not prevent you from walking around, cause an abscess or produce unpleasant discharge.



## Who is at risk?

You are more likely to develop phlebitis if you:

- Have varicose veins
- Smoke
- Are very overweight
- Are pregnant
- Are taking the contraceptive pill or HRT (there is a small increase in the risk of blood clots)
- Have a condition causing the blood to clot easily, e.g. thrombophilia
- Have cancer
- Have previously had a blood clot

There is a small chance the blood clot will grow bigger (propagate) and extend into a deeper vein, resulting in deep vein thrombosis (DVT). In 1% of these cases, the clot can break off and go to the lung (pulmonary embolism).

This is more likely if the clot is behind the knee or in the upper thigh or groin. You should see your GP immediately if you get pain, swelling and a heavy ache in your leg and by the 2012 guidelines, they should send you for a duplex ultrasound scan of the clot.

## How is phlebitis treated?

Phlebitis is inflammation, not infection, so antibiotics aren't helpful.

You can follow this advice to help reduce any pain and swelling:

- Raise the leg to help reduce swelling
- Ask your doctor if compression stockings would be suitable for you to help reduce swelling
- Keep active to keep the blood circulating
- Press a cold flannel over the vein
- Ease pain with a ibuprofen or paracetamol.

Apply a warm, moist towel or flannel to the affected limb.

You should continue to move around as normal in order to reduce the risk of DVT. If the duplex ultrasound scan shows that the clot is near the deep veins, you will need blood thinners (anticoagulation) to reduce the risk of a clot to the lungs.

The pain and inflammation should begin to respond within a few days of starting treatment.

When the inflammation settles, you may be left with darkened skin and the lump may take three or four months to go. Most people make a full recovery.

If the thrombophlebitis occurred in a varicose vein, it's likely that the varicose veins will keep coming back, possibly with further episodes of thrombophlebitis. This is because there's a basic problem with the vein, and you may need this removing.

