

HEART TO HEART:

Untreated DVT can have serious consequences

by Kimberly Ballard

The next time you water your lawn with a garden hose, notice how freely and uninhibited the water flows from the spigot, out the spout, giving life to your lawn or vegetable garden. The garden hose is similar to the individual veins, arteries and capillaries that make up a network of blood vessels inside your body known as the vascular system. Your veins and arteries carry blood to and from your heart.

In a garden hose, if you obstruct the water flow by getting a crimp in the hose or by letting a rock into the waterline, the flow will slow to a trickle or shut off passage completely. The pressure building up behind the obstruction is clearly noticeable.

Deep vein (Venous) thrombosis (DVT) is a blood clot that usually forms in a vein of the thigh and calf (or occasionally in the arm), that impedes the flow of blood. Pressure builds up around the blockage and the vein may become engorged, causing inflammation, heat, redness, swelling and extreme pain around the affected area. It may hurt to walk as well as sit, but the pain is just a symptom of the problem. The true danger occurs if the clot (or thrombosis) dislodges and passes through the lungs, causing a serious and life-threatening episode called a pulmonary embolism.

According to Lora Porter, Director of Cardiovascular Services at Crestwood Medical Center, a number of conditions can make patients more susceptible to DVT, but it is possible for it to occur after major surgery, even in people without pre-existing susceptibilities.

“Every patient who enters the hospital at Crestwood is screened for DVT risk factors as standard practice,” Porter says. “It is part of our commitment to excellence in healthcare.”

The screening process consists of a nurse’s assessment in which he asks a series

of questions about your medical history to determine risk factors: 1) Have you ever suffered from blood clots; 2) Do you have difficulty walking; 3) Do you have any leg pain, swelling, or redness? If the patient answers yes to any of these questions, or complains of signs or symptoms of DVT, an ultrasound may be performed to see if a DVT exists.

“If you have had DVT in the past, you are at a significantly higher risk,” Porter says. “People suffering from obesity or who have limited mobility are the most vulnerable.”

Pregnant women who ride for long distances in a car should get out periodically and move around because they are at risk, too. Cancer patients treated with drugs that cause hypercoagulability; women over 40 and on a birth control pill; people on bed rest for more than 24 hours; and patients in recovery after surgery are all at risk of developing DVT.

“That is one of the many reasons why we get patients up and moving around as soon as possible after a major operation,” says Porter. “Immobility is a contributing factor in people who do not have a history of blood clots.”

“There are 2 million cases of DVT reported every year, and 200,000 people die from a resulting PE,” says Marshall Robbins, Director of Pharmacy at Crestwood Medical Center. “We have traditionally treated existing cases of DVT with a combination of heparin and an oral regimen of Coumadin,

that dissolve the clots in five to seven days. We monitor the medications while they are in the hospital and after discharge patients can be seen in our Coumadin Clinic here at Crestwood, so the treatment is safe. Fortunately, we have successful methods of preventing DVT in hospitalized patients which start with appropriate screening by our dedicated nursing staff.”

Xarelto, a drug new to the market in July of this year, is highly effective in preventing blood clots after hip and knee replacement surgery.

Furthermore, in post-operative patients, prophylactic compression garments have also proven to be effective as a preventative measure against blood clots causing DVT, according to both Robbins and Porter.

The medical community has known about the dangers of deep vein thrombosis for a long time, but over the past 15 years, community awareness about the dangerous condition has greatly improved.

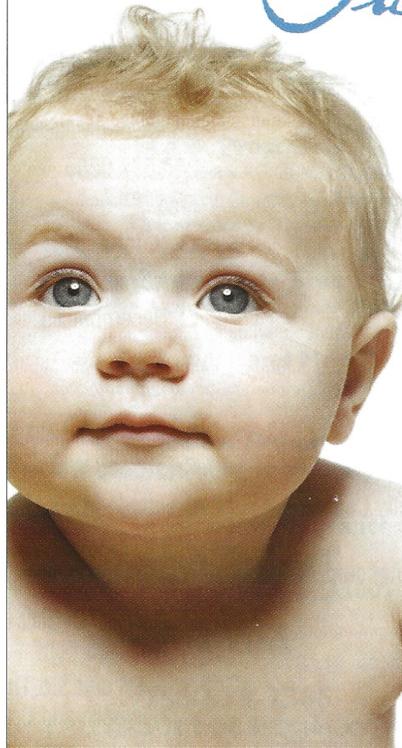
“NBC journalist David Bloom contributed to that awareness in 2003 after dying suddenly at age 39 when a DVT caused a pulmonary embolism,” Porter says.

Crestwood Medical Center is committed to keeping Huntsville residents aware of deep vein thrombosis and the dangers involved in ignoring the symptoms.

If you have limited mobility, are extremely overweight, pregnant, or have pain and swelling in your lower extremities, visit Crestwood Medical Center’s comprehensive Vein Center where a medical professional can do a quick assessment and request an ultrasound.

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