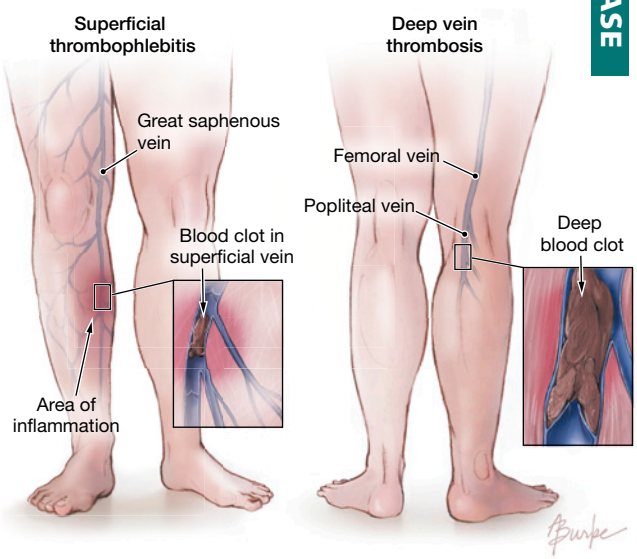
Thrombophlebitis

Blood clots can form in arteries or veins. When inflammation due to a blood clot occurs in a vein, it is called **thrombophlebitis**. Thrombophlebitis usually occurs in the veins of the legs. Rarely, it can occur in the veins of the arms or neck. **Superficial** (on the surface) thrombophlebitis occurs in the visible veins just under the skin. The area of inflammation is usually reddened, tender, and warm to the touch and can be painful. The extremity may swell and fever may occur. **Deep vein thrombosis** (**DVT**) is more dangerous than superficial thrombophlebitis. Deep vein thrombosis often cannot be seen or felt by the individual. Swelling of the leg or fever may alert a person to the presence of a DVT, especially if risk factors for DVT exist. **Pulmonary embolism**, a condition that can be fatal, results from a DVT that becomes loose in the veins and travels to the lungs. There, it blocks proper blood flow to the lungs and decreases oxygen levels in the body. The April 6, 2011, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about **thromboembolism** (clots being carried by the bloodstream). This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the July 26, 2006, issue of *JAMA*.



RISK FACTORS

- Inactivity due to recent injury, surgery, or prolonged sitting
- Pregnancy or recent childbirth
- Oral contraceptive use or estrogen therapy
- Cancer
- Stroke or other diseases that limit movement
- Family history of clotting disorders
- Central venous catheters (used for injection of medications or for dialysis)

DIAGNOSIS

In addition to a medical history and physical examination, the doctor may order tests to evaluate superficial thrombophlebitis or to look for presence of a DVT. These tests may include **D-dimer** (a blood test), **ultrasound** (using sound waves to look for a blood clot in the vein), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to visualize blood vessels, or **venography** (using injection of a dye to trace the course of a vein). If pulmonary embolism is suspected, computed tomography (CT) may be done.

PREVENTION

- Move your legs, especially during prolonged sitting (such as air travel) or bed rest
- Use compression (strong support) stockings
- Discuss your personal and family history with your doctor before considering hormone therapy

TREATMENT

Treatment for superficial thrombophlebitis usually includes elevating the leg, warm compresses to the area, and medication to decrease pain and inflammation. Support stockings may be worn to reduce swelling. Treatment for DVT or pulmonary embolism usually involves **anticoagulation** (blood thinning) treatment with **heparin** (by injection) or **warfarin** (by mouth for longer-term treatment). Pregnant women should not use warfarin because it can harm the developing fetus.

Sources: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; American Heart Association

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
  www.nhlbi.nih.gov
- American Heart Association
  www.americanheart.org

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Janet M. Torpy, MD, Writer
Alison E. Burke, MA, Illustrator
Robert M. Golub, MD, Editor

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