

Venous Thromboembolism (VTE)

Preventing blood clots when you are pregnant

Introduction

When you are pregnant and following birth you are at greater risk of forming blood clots in the veins in your legs and pelvis. This leaflet explains what to look out for and treatments that you will be offered.

Why can a blood clot form?

There are 2 factors that may cause a clot to form:

Changes or damage to the blood vessels - if there is pressure on a vein, a clot can form. This may be due to being immobile, to surgery, to long distance travel or to pressure from the baby in your tummy.

Problems with your blood - you may have been born with a condition that makes the blood more likely to clot, some medication and the hormone changes in pregnancy may cause the blood clot more. If you have not drunk enough water, the blood can become more 'sticky', which can increase the risk of the blood forming a clot.

What is a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)?

A DVT is a common medical condition that occurs when a thrombus (blood clot) forms in a deep vein, usually in the leg or pelvis. This can partially or completely block the flow of blood in the vein. It causes pain in the leg with tenderness. The leg may be more swollen, look redder and feel warmer than the other leg. There may be no leg symptoms and the blood clot may only be diagnosed if a Pulmonary Embolism occurs. There are other causes of a painful and swollen calf, particularly after injury or surgery so you should ask GP to take a look.

You will be asked to come to hospital as a matter of urgency if a DVT is suspected. A DVT in itself is not a serious condition; however it can cause a serious problem known as Pulmonary Embolus (PE).

What is a Pulmonary Embolus (PE)?

If the clot in the leg breaks off and travels to the lungs, it will cause a

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pulmonary embolus (PE). PE may result in breathing difficulties and may be fatal. Signs of a PE are:

- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Coughing up blood-streaked mucus.

If you experience any of these symptoms, you should seek immediate medical help. DVT and PE are known under the collective terms of venous thromboembolism (VTE).

Who is most at risk?

There are several factors which increase your chance of developing VTE, these include the following:

- When you are pregnant or recently had a baby (within 6 weeks)
- Having had a previous DVT or PE
- Recently had major surgery
- Family history of DVT or PE
- Advanced cancer and chemotherapy treatment for cancer
- Altered blood clotting, such as thrombophilia
- Recently had a serious medical illness (such as heart or lung disease, kidney failure or disease, recent heart attack, inflammatory conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease)
- Smoking
- Being obese (overweight)
- Paralysis or immobility of the legs including staying in bed for a long time
- Travelling for a long time – more than 3 hours.

Is travelling a risk?

Because being immobile increases the risk of developing blood clots, if you travel for more than 3 hours duration your risk of a blood clot forming will be higher.

What can you do to help yourself with travelling?

- Flight socks

- Move around regularly
- Drink plenty of fluids (not alcohol)

How is VTE prevented in pregnancy?

Not all VTE can be prevented, but the risk of developing a clot can be significantly reduced. When you are first seen by your midwife at your booking appointment she will assess your risk for developing a VTE. This may also be assessed by the hospital doctor.

Each time you are admitted to hospital and following the birth of the baby, a further VTE risk assessment will be undertaken by the midwife or doctor.

If you are considered to be at risk of VTE, medication called heparin will be given to you. Heparin is given as a small injection once a day. You will be asked to wear compression stockings.

How effective is preventative treatment?

Heparin reduces the risk of developing a DVT by up to 50% and the risk of a PE by up to 65%. In some situations it is recommended that the preventive treatment is continued for 6 weeks after the birth. You or a family member will be shown how to give the injections. You will be prescribed the injections to take home and given a container to safely dispose of the syringe and needle.

If you are unable to have Heparin injections (because of a medical condition or the type of surgery you are having), you may be asked to wear compression stockings or use some other form of prevention

What can I do to help myself?

Whilst the doctors can do something to reduce your risk, there are some very important and simple things that you can help to reduce your risk:

- Try and get up and about throughout pregnancy and after the birth, particularly if you have had an assisted birth (Caesarean section, forceps or ventouse)
- If in bed, exercise your legs
- Make sure you drink plenty - water is particularly good for you.

What can I do once I go home?

Once you get home, it is important to:

- Continue to be as mobile as possible
- Stop smoking - if you do smoke contact the Gloucestershire Stop Smoking Service on Tel: 03004 220 040 for information and help
- Continue to drink plenty of water
- If you are asked to continue taking heparin when you go home, you will be given more information and another information booklet will be given to you.

Further information will be given to you and you will be told how long you need to continue to follow this advice. If you do not take the precautions that have been mentioned, then your risk of a blood clot and its complications will be higher.

What will happen if I get a blood clot?

As already mentioned, it is still possible to get a blood clot even if you have received heparin or are using other types of prevention. If you get any of the symptoms of a DVT please inform your doctor immediately. If required, you will be given treatment.

Can VTE be treated?

Yes, the treatment is very effective if the symptoms are recognised early. The aim of the treatment is to prevent the clot spreading and to let it slowly dissolve.

Contact details

You can contact your named midwife or community midwives office:

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital

Tel: 0300 422 5128

Cheltenham General Hospital

Tel: 0300 422 2318

Stroud General Hospital

Tel: 0300 422 2145

Further information

If you would like more information, please ask a member of the team caring for you.

Life Blood, the thrombosis charity, provides detailed information about all aspects of thrombosis. Their aim is to 'stop the clots' through a programme of education and research.

Life Blood c/o The Thrombosis & Haemostasis Centre

Level 1, North Wing
St Thomas' Hospital
London
SE1 7EH
Tel: 0207 633 9937

Website: www.thrombosis-charity.org.uk

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