

BOTTOM LINE Women's Health

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THE BEST OF MAINSTREAM AND NATURAL MEDICINE

You need to know...

VISION LOSS LINKED TO BLOOD PRESSURE AND CHOLESTEROL.

With *retinal vein occlusion* (RVO), blood vessels in the eye become blocked and may rupture, damaging eyesight. *New finding:* Having high blood pressure more than tripled a person's risk for RVO...high cholesterol more than doubled RVO risk. *Best:* Get regular eye exams, and control blood pressure and cholesterol.

Joel G. Ray, St. Michael's Hospital, University of Toronto, Canada, and lead author of an analysis of 21 studies, published in *Archives of Ophthalmology*.

BROCCOLI SPROUTS VS. CANCER.

Broccoli sprouts have 30 times more *isothiocyanates*—natural anticancer chemicals—than mature broccoli. *Recent study:* Animals fed a concentrated broccoli sprout extract developed fewer than half as many bladder tumors as animals not given the extract. *Good idea:* Add broccoli sprouts to salads and sandwiches.

Yuesheng Zhang, MD, PhD, professor of oncology, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Buffalo, and leader of a study published in *Cancer Research*.

HERBAL REMEDIES CONTAIN TOXIC METALS.

A study tested 193 Ayurvedic (traditional Indian) oral medicines made in the US or India—21% contained lead, mercury and/or arsenic in amounts exceeding regulatory standards. Most likely to contain toxic metals were products labeled *rasa shastra* (a preparation combining herbs, metals, minerals and gems)...least likely were remedies from members of the American Herbal Products Association (www.ahpa.org).

Robert B. Saper, MD, MPH, director of integrative medicine, department of family medicine, Boston University School of Medicine, and leader of a study published in *Journal of the American Medical Association*.



What Every Woman Must Know About Deadly Blood Clots

Suman Rathbun, MD
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

Every year, more Americans die from preventable blood clots than from breast cancer, AIDS and traffic accidents combined. Many people are not aware of this gigantic health threat. The problem starts when a blood clot forms in a large vein deep inside the body, usually in the calf or, less commonly, in the pelvis or abdomen. This is called a *deep vein thrombosis* (DVT). It can cause severe pain, swelling and permanent blood vessel damage that make it difficult to walk.

The greater danger: In some cases, part of the DVT breaks off...travels through the veins to the heart...and from there moves into the lungs. This is called a *pulmonary embolism* (PE). It can impede blood flow to the lungs, sometimes blocking it completely. In about 10% of cases, a PE causes death within one hour.

Risk for a DVT rises with age

Bottom Line/Women's Health interviewed Suman Rathbun, MD, director of the vascular medicine fellowship program and the noninvasive vascular laboratories at University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. She is the principal investigator for numerous studies on blood clots, a trustee of the Society of Vascular Medicine and an editorial board member for *Vascular Medicine*.



because valves in the veins, which help keep blood flowing, become less efficient. Primarily because of hormonal factors, some women are at higher risk than men.

A DVT most often forms when two or more of these conditions exist...

□ Damage to the inner lining of the vein, which hinders blood flow.

□ Sluggish blood flow through a deep vein, which allows blood to pool and gives it more time to clot.

□ A genetic disorder that causes excessive clotting.

There are various causes for each >

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Tamara Eberlein
Editor

When to Call 911

My teenaged son howled, "I bent down and suddenly felt like my brain exploded!" Since Jack is prone to both migraine and exaggeration, I spent 20 minutes trying to soothe his pain before calling the doctor. "Could be a brain hemorrhage," she warned. "Call 911." In the ER, tests ruled out all dreaded diagnoses (it was probably an atypical migraine)—but I berated myself for not recognizing a possible emergency.

How does a person know when to call 911? Tom Scaletta, MD, assistant professor of emergency medicine at Cook County Hospital/Rush Medical College and president of Emergency Excellence, an ER evaluation firm, both in Chicago, includes the following among potentially life-threatening symptoms...

Sudden onset of severe headache... severe abdominal pain...shortness of breath not caused by exertion... numbness in a limb or trouble walking...altered vision or speech...confusion or dizziness.

Any occurrence of pain, squeezing or burning in the neck or torso that lasts more than a few minutes...a large amount of blood in vomit or stool...uncontrolled bleeding...fainting...a broken bone penetrating the skin.

For a symptom you have had before that turned out to be a non-emergency (such as dizziness upon standing), call your doctor—but if the symptom is new or more intense, call 911. True, the ambulance and ER visit aren't free...yet, as I told Jack, you can't put a price on a loved one's health.

Tamara

>> of these conditions. The more of the following risk factors you have, the more important it is to take steps to protect yourself...

■ **Recent surgery.** The more invasive the surgical procedure, the higher the risk for vein damage and the more blood-clotting proteins the body produces in an attempt to heal. Also, the longer a person remains sedentary after surgery, the more sluggish circulation becomes. *Reason:* During normal activity, such as walking, leg muscles contract and help pump blood onward. When mobility is curtailed, blood stagnates.

Procedures linked with especially elevated DVT risk include major gynecologic surgery, such as hysterectomy due to cancer...some other cancer surgeries, particularly ovarian and pancreatic...and orthopedic surgery, such as hip or knee replacement.

Self-defense: Before surgery, ask your doctor what precautions will be taken to prevent a DVT. You may be given an anticoagulant (orally or by injection) while recovering in the hospital and perhaps for up to four weeks after discharge. You may wear sequential compression devices—inflatable cuffs placed around the lower legs to improve blood flow—before, during and/or after surgery. *Important:* Follow instructions on how much and what type of postsurgical physical activity to do.

■ **Leg injury.** New research reveals that even a slight injury, such as an ankle sprain or a torn muscle, increases DVT risk. Microscopic damage to small blood vessels can cause deep veins to narrow...swollen tissues and inactivity can slow blood flow.

Self-defense: To reduce swelling and promote healing after an injury, elevate the leg and apply an ice pack for 15 minutes every two to three hours for one to three days. After a day or two, with your doctor's okay, do gentle stretches to improve blood flow.

■ **Being overweight and/or having a sedentary lifestyle.** Excess body weight is linked with *leptin*, a clot-promoting hormone produced by fat cells. Extra weight may be even more risky for women than for men because women's fat cells contain more *estrogen*—and this hormone also increases clotting. Lack of physical activity compounds the risk because it contributes to obesity and sluggish blood flow.

Self-defense: Ask your doctor for weight-loss and exercise advice.

■ **Cardiovascular disease (CVD).** Various types of CVD involve blood vessel blockages and/or inflammation that can impair blood flow and increase clotting. Heart failure, in which the heart's pumping is insufficient, allows blood to back up in the veins. (See page 8 for ways to prevent heart failure.) CVD patients who have a pacemaker or an implantable cardioverter defibrillator are at greater risk for clots because these devices can irritate vein walls.

Self-defense: If necessary, take drugs as prescribed to lower blood pressure and/or cholesterol. Don't smoke—it adds to CVD risk.

MORE FROM DR. RATHBUN

Can You Spot a Clot?

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)—a clot in a deep vein—may appear suddenly or over a few days. See your doctor *today* if you have any of these symptoms in one leg (or less commonly, in the pelvis or abdomen)...

- Pain, tenderness, swelling and/or a hardened area over a vein.
- Red or bluish discoloration of the skin.
- Unusual warmth in the skin.

PULMONARY EMBOLISM (PE)—a clot that travels to the lungs—can be fatal. Seek emergency care if you have any of the following...

- Sudden severe and/or bloody coughing.
- Sharp chest pain that worsens with a deep breath.
- Severe shortness of breath.
- Racing pulse.
- Severe light-headedness or fainting.

■ **Genetic disorder.** Various inherited disorders cause blood to clot excessively. The most common one, which affects up to 5% of Americans, is *factor V Leiden* (the V stands for “five”). *Clue:* A history of two or more miscarriages—because clots in the placenta can block the blood flow that the fetus needs to survive.

Self-defense: Ask your doctor about blood testing if a close relative has a clotting disorder...you have a history of DVT...or you had multiple miscarriages.

■ **Pregnancy...birth control pills or patch...hormone replacement therapy (HRT).** Blood tends to clot more during pregnancy, perhaps to minimize bleeding during childbirth. Because estrogen promotes clotting, estrogen-based contraceptives (such as the Pill or patch) or HRT (used to relieve menopausal symptoms) increase DVT risk twofold for the average woman—and tenfold or more for a woman with a clotting disorder.

Self-defense: During pregnancy, stay active and wear knee-high support hose (sold in drugstores). If you use an oral contraceptive or a patch, ask your doctor if you should switch to a low-dose pill or an estrogen-free contraceptive, such as an intrauterine device (IUD). If you are considering HRT, first get tested for a clotting disorder if you have a family history of blood clots or meet the testing criteria above. If you're already on HRT, use the lowest effective dose.

■ **Air travel or long-distance car trips.** Spending hours virtually immobilized in the seat of an airplane or a car slows blood flow.

Self-defense: Wiggle your toes and flex your feet every few minutes. Every two hours, get out of the car or stroll the airplane aisles for several minutes. If you have a history of DVT, walk every half-hour.

Information: Venous Disease Coalition, 303-989-0500, www.venousdiseasecoalition.org. ■

Kenneth Washenik, MD, PhD
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How to Halt Hair Loss

Say the words “hair loss” and people think of balding men, yet the problem affects many women, too.

The causes and patterns of hair loss are quite different between the sexes. In men, the primary culprit is a sensitivity of certain hair follicles—typically at the top and front of the head—to hormones called *androgens*. This “male-pattern baldness” often is treated by chemically blocking the hormones and/or by surgically transplanting hair.

Women typically experience overall thinning of the hair rather than obvious bald spots. This “female-pattern hair loss” may especially affect the top of the head.

For many women, hair loss is emotionally devastating. The causes of hair loss are more varied in women than in men, so the underlying problem is harder to diagnose... though once identified, it can be treated successfully.

AVOID HAIR ABUSE

The average person loses about 100 hairs per day. When the rate exceeds this, you may notice an increased number of hairs in your

Bottom Line/Women's Health interviewed Kenneth Washenik, MD, PhD, clinical assistant



professor of dermatology at New York University Langone Medical Center in New York City. He is president of the North American Hair Research Society and chief medical officer of Bosley Medical, headquartered in Beverly Hills, California. www.bosley.com



brush or shower drain...a hairstyle that feels skimpier than it used to...and/or an increasingly visible scalp.

These are signs of *alopecia*, the medical term for hair loss.

If you have developed alopecia, first consider whether you are treating your hair too harshly with any of the following...

Too-tight hairstyles. Ponytails, buns, braids and cornrows that pull hair taut can yank out strands. When such a hairstyle is worn regularly, many hairs at the stressed sites stop growing back, a condition called *traction alopecia*. Changing the hairstyle helps prevent further thinning, but hairs already lost generally do not grow back.

Hair-straightening chemicals. These can damage hair follicles if you are particularly sensitive to them or if they are applied too close to the scalp. You may experience a burning sensation during the straightening process, then notice hair loss in the following weeks. Affected hair may or may not grow back depending on the extent of the damage. *Best:* Get hair straightened only by a professional stylist. If you already have thinning hair, avoid straightening chemicals.

Styling techniques. Strong detergent shampoos, styling products with a high alcohol content and high-heat styling tools (blow-dryers, curling irons, straightening irons) are unlikely to cause hair to come out >