

Preventing and Treating Blood-Clot Disorders: What All Patients With Cancer Need to Know



Blood-clot disorders are common among patients with cancer. Read this handout to learn more about these disorders and how to reduce your risk. For more information, talk to your doctor.

What Is a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)?

A DVT happens when a blood clot forms in one of the deep blood vessels. It occurs most commonly in the leg or pelvis, but it can also develop in any deep vein, such as in your abdomen or arm. DVT may cause no symptoms at all, or it may cause swelling, redness, and/or pain.

What Is a Pulmonary Embolism (PE)?

If a blood clot forms, becomes dislodged, and passes through your blood vessels it can reach your lungs. This is called a pulmonary embolism, or PE. Symptoms of PE include coughing, chest pain, and either a gradual or a sudden onset of breathlessness. It can potentially be a serious or life-threatening condition.

Am I At Risk for Venous Thromboembolism (VTE)?

Cancer and many of the drugs used to treat different types of cancer can increase your risk for developing VTE.

Other risk factors include:

- Hospitalization, especially if prolonged
- Previous DVT/PE
- Family history of VTE
- Major surgery
- Bed rest
- Birth control pills and/or hormone-replacement therapy
- Trauma
- Varicose veins
- Obesity
- Blood diseases
- Recent stroke
- Pregnancy

How Do I Know If I Have VTE?

Some people who have VTE may not have any symptoms at all.

DVT may cause the following symptoms in your arm or leg:

- Swelling
- Pain or cramping
- Redness, tenderness, or warmth

PE may cause the following symptoms:

- Shortness of breath
- Pain in the rib-cage area
- Coughing up blood

How Is VTE Treated?

If you are diagnosed with VTE, your doctor will prescribe you an anticoagulant, which is a medicine that helps break up the blood clot and stop it from getting larger. Anticoagulant therapy may include:

- An intravenous (IV) medicine such as heparin
- A subcutaneous (under the skin) shot such as enoxaparin
- Oral medicines such as warfarin, rivaroxaban, apixaban, edoxaban, or dabigatran

Your doctor may want you to take these medications for an extended period of time. Your doctor may also recommend that you wear compression stockings, which can decrease your risk of long-term problems that can be caused from having blood clots. Some people may require a type of surgery during which a special filter is placed in a vein to “catch” the blood clot if it breaks free. Many of these filters can be removed once the risk for developing clots has passed.

Do Anticoagulant Medicines Have Any Side Effects?

All of the medications that prevent the blood from clotting normally are associated with an increased risk of bleeding. Please seek medical attention if you develop any prolonged or excessive bleeding or sustain a head injury. If you are taking subcutaneous medications, you may experience some bruising of the skin around the injection site(s). Occasionally, patients have allergic reactions to heparin injections. This will show up as an itchy rash and possibly swelling in the skin around the injection site. If you think you have had a reaction, you must let your doctor know immediately. Very rarely, heparin may make your blood platelet count drop. If you are taking heparin, your blood count will be closely monitored during treatment.

Can I Travel on an Airplane With a Blood Clot?

Following the diagnosis of a blood clot, speak with your doctor about when it's safe to fly. If you are taking injectable medicines, you may need to request a letter from your clinician so that you may carry your medication on board.

I'm Being Treated for VTE; When Should I Seek Medical Attention?

To stay healthy, it's important that you keep all follow-up appointments with your doctor(s). In addition, although new clots rarely occur in patients taking anticoagulant therapy, you must seek immediate medical attention if you have any of the following symptoms of a new clot:

- Chest pain or breathlessness
- Coughing or vomiting blood
- Increased leg swelling or pain

You must also seek immediate medical attention if you develop any problems with bleeding.

How Can I Reduce My Risk of Developing VTE?

The same medications (anticoagulants) used to treat VTE are often used for prevention also. Compression stockings may also be useful to increase blood flow. If you are being treated for cancer or have a history of cancer, talk to your doctor about your risk for VTE and how you can prevent it.

Additional Resources

ClotCare Online Resource

ClotCare strives to help others improve lives by providing both patients and healthcare providers with the most up-to-date information and expert insight on optimal use of antithrombotic and anticoagulant therapy.

<http://www.clotcare.com/>

National Blood Clot Alliance

The National Blood Clot Alliance (NBCA) is the leading nonprofit organization in the United States focused singularly on building awareness and building community among people who are affected by blood clots or who are at increased risk for blood clots.

<http://www.stoptheclot.org/>

North American Thrombosis Forum (NATF)

The NATF improves patient care, outcomes, and public health by advancing thrombosis research and education.

<http://www.natfonline.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Venous Thromboembolism (Blood Clots): What Is VTE?

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dvt/facts.html>