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WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR FAMILY'S SAFETY

UNDERSTANDING YOUR RISK OF BLOOD CLOTS

Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns about your health.

Many of us may get squeamish at the sight or thought of blood. Luckily, if we suffer from a minor cut or scrape, blood clots will form to help prevent blood loss when the skin breaks open. Clots are tangles of molecules and blood cells that clump together. Clots also help stop infections from getting inside the body. But when clotting happens inside a blood vessel, it can be dangerous.

CLOT CAUSES

Clots can form on the blood vessel walls to help them heal if they get damaged. Afterward, the clots usually dissolve. But sometimes a clot doesn't get broken down as it's supposed to. Clots may also form when they're not needed.

Sometimes, clots break off a vessel wall and travel through the blood to other parts of the body. They may cause a lot of damage, depending on where they block blood flow. Blood clots can potentially harm the brain, heart, lungs, or other organs.

Three main things can lead to dangerous blood clots. One is an abnormality in the blood that makes it more likely to clot. For example, genetic causes, cancer, or damage from smoking. The second is when blood doesn't flow properly. This can be a side effect of diseases and disorders of the heart or blood vessels.

The third is damage to the lining of blood vessels. One cause of such damage is cholesterol buildup in the blood. Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that can clump together to form plaques. If a plaque breaks apart, it can damage the blood vessel.

Blood clots can happen to anyone, at any age. But some people are at increased risk. These include older adults and those with certain heart conditions. Major surgery or a serious injury also add risk. Obesity, being physically inactive, and some medications can boost the chance of a dangerous clot, too.

SPOTTING A CLOT

Blood clots can occur anywhere in the body. That makes it difficult to find them before they cause a problem. The symptoms of a blood clot depend on where they are.

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A clot blocking blood flow to the brain can lead to a stroke. Strokes can cause sudden difficulty seeing, speaking, or walking. They can also make you feel weak, numb, dizzy, or confused. A clot that blocks blood flow to the heart can cause a heart attack. The most common signs are crushing chest pain and difficulty breathing. Others range from cold sweats to arm or shoulder pain.

A clot in the lungs can cause shortness of breath, pain when breathing deeply, or even coughing up blood. A clot in a vein deep within the body is called a deep vein thrombosis, or DVT. Symptoms include swelling, pain, warmth, or red or discolored skin. These usually happen in your legs. Long periods of inactivity can increase your risk.

If you have symptoms of a blood clot, call your health care provider or 911 immediately. You may need to go to the hospital to have blood or imaging tests.
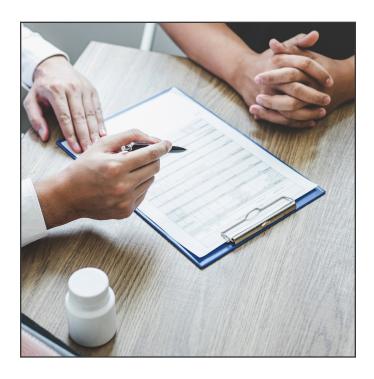
STOPPING A CLOT

If you have a clot that's forming, certain medications may help shrink it or stop it from growing. These drugs are called anticoagulants. They're more commonly known as blood thinners.

Sometimes, people with certain heart conditions are given blood thinners to prevent blood clots from forming. But blood thinners can have side effects, including an increased risk of bleeding. So, doctors don't give them to everyone.

REDUCE YOUR RISK

There are many things you can do to decrease your risk of harmful blood clots.

» Eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Limit salt and red meat.

» Aim to get some exercise, like walking, on most or all days of the week.

» Maintain a healthy weight. Excess weight can increase your chances of developing health conditions linked with blood clots. Talk to your doctor about what's a healthy weight for you.

» Control high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Talk with your doctor about how to manage these conditions.

» Quit smoking. Get free help to quit smoking at smokefree.gov, or by texting QUIT to 47848.