



Patient & Family Guide

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# Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) and Pulmonary Embolism (PE)



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# **Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) and Pulmonary Embolism (PE)**

This pamphlet will help you learn about deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. **You must be able to recognize certain symptoms so you can get medical care right away.**

## **What is a deep vein thrombosis (DVT)?**

Blood flows quickly through your veins. Usually, it does not clot (when special blood cells called platelets stick together like glue in one spot in the body). A DVT is a blood clot that forms in a deep vein in your arm or leg. The clot may get big enough to block the flow of blood in that limb.

## **What is a pulmonary embolism (PE)?**

A PE happens when one or more blood clots break off and travel to your lung(s). If a clot(s) gets stuck in an artery in your lung, it can block blood flow to the lung tissue. This is usually prevented by taking anticoagulation medications (“blood thinners”).

## **Are DVTs and PEs dangerous?**

**Yes.** A blood clot can block blood flow and affect the circulation (movement) of blood in your arm or leg. If part of the clot breaks off and travels to your lung, it could be life-threatening.

## **What are the symptoms of a DVT?**

- Pain in the arm or leg
  - › The pain may be sharp and sudden, like a muscle cramp.
  - › The pain may come on over time and get worse with when you move (like bending your arm or walking).
- Swelling in the arm or leg
  - › This is caused by less blood flow.
  - › The arm or leg may become red.
  - › The area may be tender and/or warm to the touch.

## **What are the symptoms of a PE?**

- Sudden shortness of breath
- Sharp, knife-like pain in the chest or back when you breathe in
- Coughing up blood

It can be hard to diagnose a PE because the symptoms may be the same as other conditions.

If you have any symptoms of a PE, call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away.

## Why do blood clots form?

A DVT can happen for no clear reason. You may be at a higher risk of a blood clot if you:

- › have recently had **surgery or trauma** (like a car accident or a broken hip).
- › are **immobile (not able to move)**. If you are immobile, your blood flows slower, which makes it more likely to clot.
- › have an **inherited (passed down from your parents) condition** that causes your blood to clot more easily.
- › are taking certain **medications** (like birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy).
- › have **damage to the inside lining of a vein** from an injury or an earlier DVT.
- › are **pregnant**.
- › are **overweight**.
- › are **older**.
- › have a **serious illness** (like cancer).

## How are DVTs and PEs treated?

- Most people who have a DVT or a PE can be treated as outpatients (without being admitted to the hospital). Your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) will decide what treatment is best for you.
- You may be given an anticoagulant (blood-thinning) medication (like Eliquis<sup>®</sup>, Xarelto<sup>®</sup>, Pradaxa<sup>®</sup>, warfarin, Fragmin<sup>®</sup>, or Lixiana<sup>®</sup>).
- If the DVT is in your leg, raise the affected leg when sitting.
- It is best to stay active during your recovery. Stop and rest if you have pain or discomfort in your arm or leg, or are short of breath.
- If you need medication for discomfort or pain, take acetaminophen (Tylenol<sup>®</sup>).
- **Do not take ASA (Aspirin<sup>®</sup>) or ibuprofen (Advil<sup>®</sup> or Motrin<sup>®</sup>) when you are taking an anticoagulant.**

## How can I lower my risk of another DVT or PE?

- **Exercise.** Move your legs to keep the blood flowing.
- **Keep a healthy weight.** Weighing less puts less pressure on your legs.
- **Avoid long periods of sitting or standing.** Change your position often to help with blood flow. If you are taking a long flight, get up and walk around, if possible.
- **Do not wear tight clothing around your calves (lower part of your leg) or groins.** This makes it harder for blood to circulate.

**If you think you are having another DVT/PE, you need medical attention right away.**

- If you have mild symptoms (like pain and/or swelling in your arm or leg), call your primary health care provider.
- If you have severe (very bad) symptoms (like shortness of breath), call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away.

