

BEAUTY ENQUIRER

VEIN *attempts*

Fed up of hiding her legs thanks to thread veins, Jess Lacey finds out whether she has any hope of embracing the miniskirt again

At certain ages you have to grudgingly admit that some things are no longer appropriate – miniskirts at 30 being a great example. I'm 29 and in my prime (let me have that one), so if I'm going to strut around in thigh-skimming attire, my window is narrowing. But actually, I don't own an above-the-knee skirt. I'm so conscious of the veins on my legs that, even on holiday, I resort to cigarette pants or a long sundress.

There's uncertainty as to why varicose and thread veins develop, but they're often hereditary. An estimated 80 per cent of women in the UK suffer from thread veins, and if your mother or grandmother did it's likely you will, too.

Thread veins are ruptured blood vessels that appear near the surface of the skin, often on the calves, thighs and ankles. They affect all ethnicities, but the darker the skintone, the more difficult they are to see. Usually they're of no consequence to your health, so are treated purely for cosmetic reasons. Often, though, thread veins are caused by underlying varicose veins that feed into them (even if the varicose veins themselves aren't visible on the skin's surface), which is why, if you're thinking of having them treated, it's paramount to have an extensive ultrasound scan with a vascular surgeon to see what's really going on deep inside. There's no point having thread veins treated if you don't address the underlying issue, as they'll just return.

Varicose veins themselves are caused by damaged or weakened valves in leg veins. The blood in your legs flows against gravity as it travels up to the heart, and valves within your veins prevent the blood from flowing back the wrong way. Over time, though, these valves can stop working effectively, and that upward



flow loses pressure. This can cause blood to leak back into the veins and pool, stretching them into knobbly, knotted shapes. Although these varicose veins can affect the circulation, they're not usually considered a health risk.

Unfortunately, whether you have thread veins, varicose veins or both, you won't get much support from your GP – unless your veins are very swollen, tender or are literally bleeding – and even if they're obliging enough to refer you to a specialist, it's common to wait six months to be seen. If you haven't had children, the NHS is likely

to be reluctant to treat you because, during pregnancy, the increase in the volume of blood circulating around the body adds pressure to both veins and valves, heightening the risk of varicose veins and, consequently, thread veins.

Michael Jenkins, consultant vascular surgeon at Imperial College Healthcare, explains: 'Varicose veins are seldom dangerous, so in order to judge the severity of each case, certain criteria have to be met. Minor veins can wait to be treated until after pregnancy, as they could easily worsen after the birth.' ►

I don't want to wait for hypothetical children – my time is now. So, willing to pay the private price tag, I make an appointment with Constantinos Kyriakides, consultant vascular surgeon at The Private Clinic and Barts Health NHS Trust.

After a thorough ultrasound scan, he explains my condition is fairly standard and advises an initial course of liquid sclerotherapy to treat my thread veins, followed by foam sclerotherapy for the varicose vein on my thigh.

'Liquid sclerotherapy entails injecting saline solution through the thread vein with a tiny needle,' explains Kyriakides. 'This causes the vein to collapse and gradually dissolve.' Technique is crucial, which is why it's imperative the treatment is done by an experienced vascular surgeon and never by a nurse or beauty therapist. I'll need three sessions, spaced six weeks apart.

I am concerned about the pain, as I know that some people find it unbearable (one friend undergoing the same treatment actually gave up halfway through). In fact, each time the needle goes in there is a sharp sting, but I manage to stay on the couch as Kyriakides works his way from my shins to my thighs, tackling each vein he comes across.

Then it's time for the big one – the single varicose on my thigh. Foam sclerotherapy involves injecting the vein with a solution that first pushes the blood out of the vein, then forces the walls to fuse together and

finally close off. I must stay completely still while the giant needle feeds in slowly. I'm then bandaged up from ankle to thigh, with compression stockings over the top, and I waddle home feeling rather delicate.

I can't bend my knees and I need help changing into my clothes, so my husband of three months becomes my carer. He tells me this was not what he was anticipating so early on in our marriage. I'm increasingly sore and there are twinges that cause me to gasp, but after two rough nights of sleep it's time to take the bandages off. I haven't seen my legs since the procedure was carried out and I'm worried there'll be blood and puncture wounds. Either way, my husband will see them first as he cuts off the bandages.

As it turns out, some veins are black and angry while others are noticeably fainter. The stockings go back on and for the next week they are the key feature of my wardrobe; uncomfortably compact under jeans but even worse with a skirt. Sensible slacks it is, then.

Six months and three treatments later, my veins are transformed. The protruding varicose vein has shrunk to a fraction of its former self and the thread veins are barely detectable. A lot of people would stop there, but I'm aiming for perfection so I'll have a course of laser therapy to zap them away altogether. Much to the dismay of my husband, a friend and I are taking my new legs to Ibiza, where they can fully embrace miniskirts on a daily basis – and who knows what else they'll get up to.

REDUCE YOUR RISK OF THREAD VEINS

1. VITAMIN K

helps promote blood clotting, which prevents the capillaries from dilating and causing thread veins. It's found in green leafy vegetables like broccoli and spinach, and milk.

2. HORSE CHESTNUTS

contain aescin, an anti-inflammatory credited with strengthening vein walls and enhancing blood flow. Horse chestnut extract is available as a supplement.

3. THE CONTRACEPTIVE PILL

might not be advisable. It affects the levels of oestrogen and progesterone in your body, which can increase the risk of varicose veins. Check with your doctor first.

4. COMPRESSION SOCKS

help to reduce the risk of varicose veins associated with standing up for long periods of time. Choose a subtle knee-high pair.

WHICH TREATMENT IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

A vascular specialist should refer you for a scan to see the condition of your veins, which will indicate the treatment you need. The most common are:

LASER THERAPY

What's it for? Clearing up thread veins after feeder veins have been dealt with.
What is it? The latest product is the Norseld Dual Yellow Laser. Its light is absorbed by haemoglobin (in your blood), so only your vein is zapped and not the surrounding skin. From £195 per session, per leg; available nationwide.

SCLEROTHERAPY

What's it for? Liquid injections treat thread veins, while foam injections work on some types of varicose veins.
What is it? A series of saline injections

causes the vein walls to collapse and close off. From £750 per leg for three treatments (thepivateclinic.co.uk).

SAPHEON VEIN GLUE

What's it for? Superficial varicose veins.
What is it? 'A dollop of special glue, applied through a tiny hole, seals off the faulty vein with no need for anaesthetic,' says Ian Franklin, lead vascular surgeon consultant at the Cadogan Clinic. From £3,000 (londonvascularclinic.com).

PHLEBECTOMY

What's it for? Bulging, surface veins.
What is it? Tiny incisions are made in the skin and a hook is used to remove the knotted section of the vein. The two remaining ends are sealed together. From £1,000 per leg; available nationwide.

RADIO-FREQUENCY ABLATION

What's it for? Most varicose veins.
What is it? Paul Baskerville of the Vascular & Vein Unit explains: 'We make a tiny puncture in the skin and pass a catheter through, under local anaesthetic. A powerful shot of radio frequency is delivered and destroys the vein from within.' From £1,000 (vascularandveinunit.com).

ENDOVENOUS LASER ABLATION

What's it for? Extreme cases of valve disruption and major varicose veins.
What is it? Professor Mark Whiteley says: 'A needle is inserted into the vein under local anaesthetic, followed by a laser fibre. The laser is slowly pulled out, firing as it goes to close the vein. From £2,100 (thewhiteleyclinic.co.uk).' ■