ENLARGED VEINS IN THE SCROTUM

Varicocele

A varicocele is a swelling of the veins above a testicle, similar to varicose veins in the leg. It is common and usually causes no symptoms, and most do not need treatment.

What is it?

The veins that carry blood away from the testicle become wider and twisted. Varicoceles affect about 15 to 20 in every 100 men and teenage boys, and usually become noticeable around puberty. About 9 in 10 are on the left side only. The exact cause is not fully understood, but the valves in the veins and the pressure inside them are thought to play a part.

What you might notice

- Often nothing at all. It may only be found by chance during an examination or a scan.
- One side of the scrotum, usually the left, hanging lower than the other side.
- A dragging or heavy feeling, or an ache in the scrotum or groin. This is uncommon.
- A painless swelling above the testicle, often said to feel like a 'bag of worms'.
- Swelling that is more obvious when you stand, and usually goes down when you lie down.
- A smaller testicle on that side, mainly in teenage boys with a larger varicocele.

Sizes of varicocele

Very small (subclinical)
Cannot be felt. It only shows up on an ultrasound scan.

Small (grade 1)
Can only be felt when you hold your breath and bear down.

Moderate (grade 2)
Can be felt without bearing down, but cannot be seen.

Large (grade 3)
Big enough to be seen through the skin of the scrotum, without needing to feel for it.

Fertility and testicle growth

Nearly two in three men with a varicocele have no difficulty fathering children, although a varicocele can be linked with fertility problems. In teenage boys, a larger varicocele can slow the growth of the testicle, so it is worth having this checked.

Who is more likely to have one

Being tall and lean | **Being underweight** | **A close relative with a varicocele**

Please turn over for what helps, what the doctor will do and when to get help

How you can help yourself

Supportive underwear
Can ease a dragging or heavy feeling in the scrotum.

Simple pain relief
Painkillers can ease an ache. Follow the pack's directions.

Talk to us
Tell us if you are worried about fertility or how it looks.

What the doctor will do

1. **Examine you,** lying down and standing up. This is often all that is needed.
2. **Arrange an ultrasound** if we are unsure, or the area is hard to examine.
3. **Offer tests** if fertility is a concern, such as a semen test and hormone blood tests.
4. **Plan what happens next.** Teenage boys may have a yearly check through puberty.

Will I need treatment?

Usually not. We may refer you to a urologist if your varicocele is causing pain, if it may be affecting your fertility, or if a teenage boy's testicle is smaller or not growing as it should. They will explain the risks and benefits of the options:

An operation
A surgeon closes off the enlarged veins so that blood takes another route.

Embolisation
The veins are blocked from inside, using a fine tube guided by x-ray.

Treatment can reduce pain and improve testicle size and semen quality. It is less clear whether it leads to more pregnancies, so it is not routinely offered for fertility alone.

Go to A&E straight away if

- You have sudden pain in the scrotum or a testicle, with or without swelling. This may be a twisted testicle
- You have severe scrotal pain with a fever, or feel very unwell
- You have pain and swelling after an injury

Contact us the same day if

- A swelling appears suddenly, without pain
- The swelling stays tense or does not go down when you lie down

Evenings and weekends: **NHS 24 on 111**. Book an appointment soon for a painless lump or change in a testicle, an ache, or if a boy or his parents are worried.

Living with a varicocele

Most varicoceles cause no symptoms, do not affect fertility and never need treatment. If yours does not need treating, it is unlikely to cause symptoms or long-term problems.

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