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Varicocele

Definition

Varicocele is an enlarged vein in a testicle. The **testes** produce sperm and male hormones.

Cause

Varicose veins, including varicoceles, occur because of an increase in water pressure in the veins.

To understand water pressure better, remember that when you dive in water, the deeper you go, the greater the pressure on your eardrums. At the bottom of a column of water, the pressure from the weight of the water above causes an increase in pressure.

Varicose veins usually occur in the legs and lower parts of the body, where there is the greatest fluid pressure. For the same reason, they also occur in the testicles. About 10 percent of all men have a varicocele. Most of the time, it is harmless. But in a significant number of men, the varicocele seems to cause diminished fertility, and in others, it can cause pain.

Symptoms

The classic symptom of a varicocele is a dull constant ache in the testicle. The pain may be relieved somewhat, by lying down.

The pain is usually present after prolonged periods upright and rarely occurs when in bed or upon awakening in the morning. There also may be a feeling of heaviness.

Diagnosis

A varicocele may be discovered during a man's physical exam, when he is asked to stand up and bear down or cough. If a varicocele is present, the extra pressure usually will make the vein bulge, and the health care provider can feel it in the scrotum. Sometimes, the varicocele is so small or hidden that it cannot be felt. An ultrasound, which uses sound waves to project images inside the body, may be ordered.

Treatment

Varicocele pain may subside permanently and as mysteriously as it began or may become a chronic problem. If the symptoms of the varicocele are mild, doctors usually recommend:

- Scrotal support with tighter jockey shorts or a jock strap.
- An over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID).

If the pain persists, surgery is usually recommended. Either general or local anesthesia can be used in this operation. The surgeon makes an incision in the lower abdomen, locates the bundle of blood vessels and isolates the veins from the artery and the *vas deferens*, the tubes that carry the sperm. The surgeon ties off the main trunk of the veins above the varicocele.

New pathways will open up to carry blood from the testicles. You may remain in the hospital overnight or go home the same day. You should be able to resume his normal activities, including sex, within a week.

Another technique is to have a radiologist plug off the vein by inserting a small balloon into the testicular vein. This procedure does away with the surgical incision but has the potential risk of clotting the bigger veins and having the balloon migrate into the lungs.

Another approach uses a *laparoscope* (a thin tube through which structures within the abdomen and pelvis can be seen by the surgeon). The varicocele can be clipped. This reduces the incision size but takes longer to perform and adds the risks of entering the abdomen, which the normal surgical procedure does not do.

Each of the procedures has a small failure rate of about 5 percent. That is, the varicocele persists or comes back. This may require a repeat procedure to solve the problem.

After any of the techniques, the pain usually subsides, although not necessarily immediately. The risks of the surgery include anesthesia and wound complications. A water cyst, or *hydrocele*, can form around the testicle and may require an additional procedure to treat. No guarantee of pain relief can be given.

Tips

- Report any pain to your health care provider.
- If you don't understand the varicocele and its treatment, ask for more information.