

Carroll County Times

Sunday, July 8, 2007

Family Section, Page B1

New Treatments Close Swollen Veins Without Pain

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WESTMINSTER – Ed Garabedian of Mount Airy was 20 years old when he first noticed the unsightly bulges on his legs.

More of these gnarled bumps gradually appeared throughout the years until they covered most of his legs, with large clusters bulging behind his knees.

"Forget the cosmetic part - they look ugly, but I didn't really care much about it," said Garabedian, now 48.

What bothered him, he said, was the swelling and aching that accompanied them.

The increasing pain eventually led him to seek treatment for what are known as varicose veins, a problem that affects 25 million Americans, according to the National Institutes of Health.

They develop from leaky valves in the veins, which prevents the blood from flowing back up to the heart, said Dr. Garth Rosenberg, a vascular surgeon in Frederick who has treated Garabedian for four years.

The blood then flows backwards and pools inside the vein, causing it to become enlarged, twisted and often painful - in some cases it can lead to skin ulcers, Rosenberg said.

Varicose veins occur most frequently in the legs, because the blood has to fight gravity, he said. According to the NIH, risk factors include genetics, obesity, pregnancy and prolonged standing or sitting.

Doctors once treated the problem using a procedure called vein stripping, during which the veins were closed off and removed through small incisions.

The surgery is successful most of the time, but its reputation for having a long recovery period and post-operative pain is one of the reasons varicose veins are undertreated, according to Rosenberg, who said he estimates 30 to 40 percent of women and 15 to 25 percent of men in their 40s and older have vein-related problems.

However, many doctors stopped doing the procedure seven or eight years ago, according to Dr. Sarva Girdhar, a general surgeon at Carroll Hospital Center, who noted that vein stripping also can damage nerves that lie close to the veins.

Varicose veins are now treated with an outpatient procedure performed in a doctor's office. It was introduced in 1999 and works by delivering heat through a catheter to shrink the vein's walls and close it off, said Rosenberg, who began performing venous closure in 2000. Girdhar said some doctors use a laser instead, but either way, the treatment is relatively quick and pain free.

However, not everyone is aware of the current treatments, which is why some people may avoid seeing a doctor for their swollen veins, Rosenberg said.

"People associate it with vein stripping," he said.

In February, Rosenberg became one of the principal investigators of the VNUS Closure FAST catheter, which treats varicose veins in about three minutes - even more quickly than the original venous closure.

"I've had people go back to work the same day after the procedure," Rosenberg said, adding that patients can drive themselves home from the office following the treatment.

In the past few months, about two dozen Carroll County residents, including Garabedian, have received the latest procedure through Capitol Vein & Laser Center, Frederick, where Rosenberg works.

When Garabedian initially sought treatment for the masses of varicose veins behind his knees, the problem had become so severe that it required vein stripping.

This year, however, he had two venous closures for other veins in both of his legs. He recalls spending less than an hour in the doctor's office for the most recent one in June.

"I was playing golf the next day," he said.

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