

Deep Vein Thrombosis: Prevention During and After Pregnancy

What is deep vein thrombosis?

Deep vein thrombosis (also called **DVT**) is a blood clot (or **thrombus**) in the deep veins of the body. Most DVTs develop in the veins of the leg.

A DVT is dangerous. If it breaks loose and travels in your blood vessels to your lungs, it can be life-threatening. (A blood clot that has broken loose is called an **embolus** or **embolism**, and if it has traveled to your lungs it's called a **pulmonary embolism**.) A DVT should be treated right away to prevent an embolism.

What is the connection between DVT and pregnancy?

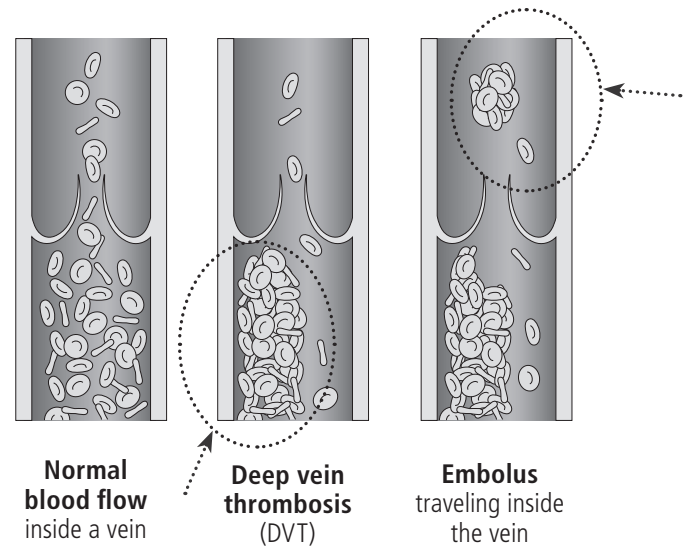
Compared to when you're NOT pregnant, **your risk of having a DVT is much higher during pregnancy and in the first 6 weeks afterward**. There are two main reasons for this:

- Hormones in your body make your blood more likely to clot than normal.
- Slower blood flow — from your expanding uterus pressing on your blood vessels, and from being less physically active — also promotes blood clotting.

Your risk of DVT is increased further if you're on bedrest during pregnancy or recovering from a C-section (cesarean section) birth. DVT leading to pulmonary embolism is a major cause of death in women during pregnancy and the postpartum period.

What are other risk factors for DVT?

DVTs are caused by anything that slows circulation or by factors that make the blood more likely to clot. This can include inactivity, surgery, injury, or inherited factors. Smoking and being overweight or obese also increase risk.

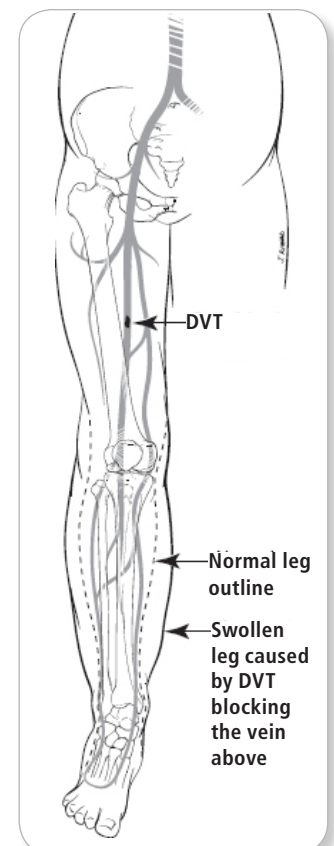


What are the symptoms?

You may not have any symptoms from a DVT. If you do, you might notice these symptoms in the affected area (usually the leg):

- Pain in the leg
- Swelling in one calf, ankle, foot, or thigh
- Redness or warmth in part of your leg

Sometimes the first symptoms are from a pulmonary embolism. These are listed on the next page, in the box titled "When to get medical help."



How can I prevent it?

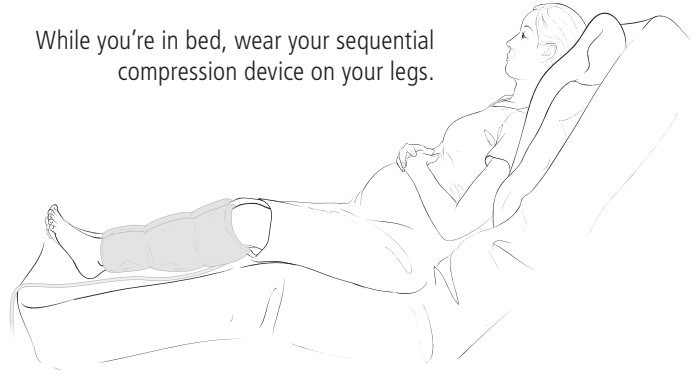
If you're on bedrest or recovering from a C-section, your care team may suggest these preventive steps:

- **Sequential compression device (SCD).** This device helps prevent DVT by gently squeezing your legs in a sequence. This speeds circulation in your veins. Make sure your SCD is on your legs — and that it's turned on — for as long as you're confined to bed. You may find the device noisy and perhaps a bit hot, but it's important!
- **Medication.** You may need to take an anticoagulant (“blood thinning”) medication. It can help prevent clots from forming or getting bigger.

All pregnant and postpartum women should follow these general measures for preventing DVT:

- If you have to sit for a long time, stretch your legs and feet every 20 minutes. Get up and walk around every hour. (NOTE: This doesn't apply to women on bedrest.)
- Drink plenty of water.
- Follow your doctor's or midwife's advice about exercise and lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking.
- Keep all of your scheduled visits with your doctor or midwife.

While you're in bed, wear your sequential compression device on your legs.



How is it treated?

DVT needs to be treated right away. The goal is to prevent the blood clot from getting bigger or becoming an embolism. Treatment also aims to keep you from getting more blood clots. Your treatment may include medication. If you can't take medication, you may have a procedure to place a filter in one of your veins (the filter may trap an embolism before it reaches your lungs). Your doctor may also recommend that you:

- Wear compression stockings (sometimes called T.E.D. hose). These can reduce the swelling and prevent the blood in your legs from pooling.
- Use — or continue to use — an SCD as directed.
- Elevate your leg.
- Apply a heating pad for 20 minutes every 2 hours.

When to get medical help

While you're pregnant or recovering from a pregnancy, it's important to be alert to symptoms of DVT or pulmonary embolism.

Contact your doctor or midwife immediately if you notice these DVT symptoms:

- Pain or tenderness in one leg when walking or standing
- Swelling in one calf, ankle, foot, or thigh
- Redness or warmth in part of your leg

*Note: During pregnancy and in the postpartum period, **DVT is more common in the left leg.** Be especially alert to symptoms in your left leg.*

Call 911 if you notice any of these signs of pulmonary embolism:

- Shortness of breath that comes on suddenly
- Chest pain that gets worse when you breathe deeply or cough
- Coughing or vomiting blood