

Sitting comfortably?

A guide to avoiding travellers' thrombosis (DVT)

Clotting of blood — usually occurring in the lower legs — is known as deep venous thrombosis (DVT).

Travellers' thrombosis is a potential complication during journeys lasting several hours and can affect all adults regardless of age. NUMAST has produced this guidance to raise members' awareness of DVT and to offer guidance and advice on the subject.

It is important to note that not everyone who travels develops DVT. The main risk factors for developing travellers' thrombosis during long-distance flights are the cramped conditions of most aircraft, the resulting lack of exercise, dehydration, and the sitting position with the knees bent.

DVT is also known as 'economy class syndrome' and is usually synonymous with flying — but this is misleading as thromboses can occur after car, bus, rail or air travel and there is no conclusive evidence that flying in itself is a specific risk factor. Cases of DVT occurring in flight have also been reported in travellers in premium cabins as well as economy. The term 'travellers' thrombosis' is therefore more appropriate.

The risks

In some cases, DVT can lead to complications: a clot formed as a result of DVT may break free and travel to the lungs where it may obstruct the blood supply. This usually occurs only where

there is already an extensive clot in the leg and may happen many hours or days after the formation of the clot. It may result in serious consequences including chest pain, shortness of breath and even sudden death.

Some people are more susceptible to DVT than others. The risk factors that increase the possibility of DVT include:

- previous personal or family history of DVT
- risk increases with age (over 40 years)
- abnormality of blood clotting factors
- certain forms of cardiovascular disease
- pregnancy
- previous history or currently suffering from malignant disease
- certain medications (particularly hormones, diuretics or hypnotics)
- recent major surgery or injury, particularly affecting the lower limbs or abdomen
- recent trauma to the lower limbs
- existing venous diseases

Some research has also suggested that there may be an added risk from tobacco smoking, obesity and varicose veins. If someone is in any of the above categories, it is recommended that a doctor is consulted before undertaking a flight. A doctor may recommend medication (such as aspirin), the use of elastic support stockings, or other measures.

Signs and symptoms

DVT is most common in the lower limbs and may occur without any obvious signs or symptoms. The general symptoms, where they occur, are pain, tenderness, swelling and discolouration of the affected limb. The leg may also feel warm to touch and there may be congestion of the superficial veins.

Advice

Advice to avoid the development of DVT for all passengers:

- avoid smoking
- drink adequate fluids
- avoid alcoholic beverages
- avoid caffeine drinks, both before and during the flight
- avoid crossing legs when seated
- walk around the cabin whenever you can
- stand up in your seat area and stretch your arms and legs
- carry out the foot and leg exercises advised in airline literature
- wear loose fitting comfortable clothes when travelling
- avoid knee socks or hosiery that might limit blood flow through the leg and use support stockings for varicose veins

If there are concerns about DVT or may have any of the additional risk factors listed previously, medical advice should be sought before travelling to obtain advice.

Further Information

- http://www.britishairways.com/travel/healthdvt/public/en_
- <http://www.doh.gov.uk/dvt/>
- http://hcd2.bupa.co.uk/fact_sheets/mosby_factsheets/Deep_Vein_Thrombosis.html
- most airline leaflets and in-flight information

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