

AUGUSTA

magazine of metropolitan augusta

HOME | ARCHIVES | SUBSCRIBE | LOCATIONS | ADVERTISE | CONTACT US | PHOTOS

Health

Lovely Legs

You can render your legs short skirt-worthy again by ridding them of unsightly varicose and spider veins.

by Eileen Brandon

Do the veins on your legs make you look more like a road map than a Rockette? If so, you've probably traded in your shorts and mini-skirts for longer clothing styles. But if you'd like to go back to the days of showing off your legs, you'll be glad to know vein treatment has come a long way, just in the last year or two. New technologies vanquish varicose and spider veins easier, faster and with less pain than ever.

Spider veins are those areas of small red or blue blood vessels near the skin surface. They tend to pop up on your legs, face or chest. "When it comes to spider veins, the problem is almost uniquely female," says Keith Davis, M.D., a plastic surgeon and co-director of the Vein Care Pavilion of the South, which recently opened in Evans. "It's the veins women get when they're pregnant or when they first go on the pill or had a hysterectomy or if they get put on hormone replacement therapy."

Until recently, two treatment choices existed: either zapping the tiny veins with a laser or injecting them with saline. "The only tool you had was a hammer and everything was a nail," says Dr. Davis. "Now there are so many different sclerotherapy agents that the first line of therapy may be saline or it may be the new foam injectables. Or you may need a combination of foam with laser or maybe just laser." Which treatment is best depends upon the diameter and depth of the blood vessels.

Each product works differently to achieve the desired effect. The saline injections are made up of hypertonic saline, which is a highly concentrated form of salt water. Using a very fine needle, the physician injects this saline into the vein. (The pain is negligible because the needles are so small.) The saline agent causes a sludging effect that clots off the blood flow in that vein over the course of the next three to seven days. Because they're superficial vessels, it's safe to close them off. "It's different from clots that go to people's brains or hearts," says Dr. Davis. "That's the deep venous system." Some bruising may occur, so plan to have this procedure in the fall or winter, well before time to don leg-baring attire.

On the other hand, foam injection can be done any time of year because bruising is not a problem. This method also gives longer-lasting results. "The foam is a product that mixes with the red blood cells and causes a sludge effect which collapses the vessel," says Dr. Davis. But unlike saline, which takes up to a week to clot off the vessel, the foam does its job within 24 hours. Plan on spending \$250 to \$400 per sclerotherapy session, with two to four treatments generally necessary.

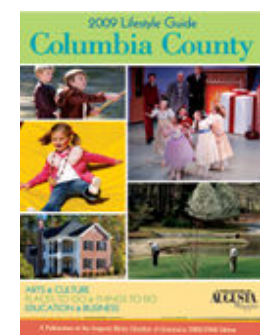
Laser treatment works by heating and closing the blood vessels with laser energy, essentially "cauterizing" them. The pain is minimal and the effect instantaneous. Laser may be used by itself or in combination with one of the injectable therapies. Sometimes it's the only option. "Some vessels, like strawberry hemangiomas—little red blushes where it's a bunch of capillaries and a little outer circle—those you get layered," says Dr. Davis. "You can't inject because you can't find the feeder vessel." The cost for the N-LIT laser is \$500 to \$1,000, but veins vanquished by this technique generally require only one treatment.

Some patients wonder whether they should wait until they're older and get all their veins done at once. "Absolutely not," Dr. Davis says. "There's only so much of these things you can do at one time. Somebody who starts out early can get treatment now and then again two or three or four



SUBSCRIBE NOW

Order Augusta Magazine Subscriptions Now!



Read more

SPECIAL SECTION



Read more

SPECIAL SECTION

years down the road. Then they always have pretty legs, as opposed to wearing dark pantihose."

Both men and women suffer from them—those painful, ropey, bulging blue vessels known as varicose veins. They develop when the valves that usually keep blood flowing out of your legs stop working. "Where you get those large rope-like vessels, blood has gone past the defective valve and gone to the next working valve," says Dr. Davis. "Since the valve has to hold more blood than it normally would, it gets bigger. Over the years, that vessel has to dilate to accommodate the extra blood in that tube, so it becomes more prevalent as you get older."

The theory is that it's failure of the valve function in either the lesser or greater saphenous veins that causes superficial venous disease in many people. The resulting distended veins are not only unattractive, but they also can swell and cause throbbing and burning pain. In the past, the only treatment option was stripping of the saphenous vein, which requires multiple cuts and a lengthy recovery time. "Traditionally, incisions would be made from the top to the bottom of the leg to remove that long vein," says Dr. Steve Roth, a vascular surgeon and co-director of the Vein Care Pavilion of the South. Fortunately, now there are newer, minimally invasive techniques for treating superficial vein problems.

One of those new techniques is Closure (www.VNUS.com), which essentially closes the diseased vein, rather than stripping it away. Using a small needle to enter the affected vein, the surgeon inserts a long catheter with a radiofrequency probe on the end. Beginning at the top of the leg, the surgeon heats the vein wall with the radiofrequency energy and basically closes the vein by "welding it shut," says Dr. Roth. "That's the best way to describe it." He adds, "So now when blood will try to exit the leg, it will preferentially go through other veins and won't have the opportunity to go through this vein. I call it a no-incision vein stripping."

Dr. Roth assures that taking superficial veins out of commission is perfectly safe. "There's such a vast network of veins in our legs that you don't miss those veins whatsoever," he says. In fact, it's the saphenous vein that's removed from the leg for use in heart surgeries such as arterial bypass. Closure offers tremendous benefits over conventional treatment. Unlike traditional vein stripping, which requires general anesthesia and an inpatient stay, this minimally-invasive technique requires only local anesthesia in an outpatient or office setting with a much shorter procedure time. Another benefit is minimal or no scarring, bruising or swelling. And you can resume normal activities immediately post-treatment. "There are no restrictions," says Dr. Roth. "That's what makes this procedure so amazing."

Another new method with similar benefits, the endovenous laser (www.evlt.com), uses laser technology rather than radiofrequency waves to close off the saphenous vein. The cost for either of these procedures can range from \$2,000 to \$3,000 and may be covered by insurance.

Closure or EVLT may cure the underlying cause of superficial venous disease, but additional treatment may be necessary to vanquish remaining varicose veins. The traditional approach is to use a laborious procedure called phlebectomy. This involves making as many as 50-100 small incisions in the skin and pulling veins out in segments, until all visible varicose veins have been removed. This tedious surgery can take two to five hours to perform and commonly causes bruising.

Fortunately, patients can now benefit from a new technique called TriVex, or transilluminated powered phlebectomy (www.endo.smith-nephew.com). It takes half as long to do, requires only two to three incisions per leg and minimizes bruising. With the TriVex system, the surgeon uses a special light wand to clearly see the veins to be removed. The veins are obliterated with a rotating blade and suctioned out. TriVex is outpatient surgery, but is typically done with general anesthesia for patient comfort. After surgery, patients experience some soreness and bruising, but can resume normal activities within days. The cost ranges from \$1,500 to \$3,000.

Sorting out which of these cutting-edge techniques is best for you is a job best left to a physician experienced in performing these procedures. At the new Vein Care Pavilion of the South, both Drs. Roth and Davis meet with first-time patients for the initial consultation. "Most people are coming for vein care, not only for cosmetic reasons, but also because of pain or swelling," says Dr. Roth. "Combining the disciplines of vascular surgery and plastic surgery really does give the best results." He adds, "It's a really good feeling when you can walk out of a room and know you're really going to make this person happy."



[Read more](#)

SPECIAL SECTION



[Best of Augusta 2008](#)



[Read Lake Oconee Sampling](#)

Masters 08 Issue



