Varicocele

A varicocele is a soft lump in your testicles caused by swollen veins. It's usually harmless, although you might not like how it looks. But some doctors think that a varicocele could make it harder for you to have children.

We’ve brought together the best and most up-to-date research about varicocele to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is a varicocele?

A varicocele happens if some of the veins in your testicles swell up with blood. It’s a bit like having varicose veins in your testicles. About 1 in 7 men and teenage boys get a varicocele.

What are the symptoms?

The swelling is normally at the top of your scrotum. Because a varicocele is caused by swollen veins, it can feel like a bunch of tubes. Some men say it feels like a ‘bag of worms’. A varicocele almost always affects the left testicle, but you can get it on the right side or even on both.

Some doctors think that having a varicocele makes it harder to have children, but there hasn’t been enough research to be certain one way or another. Some men with a varicocele get pain or an ache in their testicles.

You should always see a doctor if you find a lump or swelling in your testicles. It could be cancer. Cancer of the testicles is rare, but it's best to check just in case.

What treatments work?

There are several types of operation that can get rid of a varicocele. But although surgery can get rid of the swelling, there hasn’t been enough research to say whether it will help with pain or make it easier for you to father children. But you can talk to your doctor if you’d like to have treatment.

If you’re having problems fathering children, your doctor will probably also refer you to a specialist. They’ll be able to tell you about the pros and cons of having an operation. The final decision will be up to you.

Surgery or injections to close off the veins

An operation can tie off swollen veins and get rid of a varicocele. You'll need to go to hospital, but you'll probably be able to go home the same day. Usually you'll have a general anaesthetic to make you sleep.
The operation can be done as **keyhole surgery**, through several small cuts in your lower abdomen. Or it can be done as **open surgery**, through one larger cut. Either way, the cut or cuts will be in your lower abdomen, not your scrotum. Even for open surgery, the cut is only about two-and-a-half centimetres (one inch) long. Once the swollen veins in your testicle have been tied off, other veins in your testicle will take over. So the blood flow in your testicle should be normal afterwards.

Having any kind of operation means there's a risk of pain or an infection afterwards. It is rare, but there is also a risk of an allergic reaction to the anaesthetic. But not many men get problems after an operation for a varicocele. If your surgeon accidentally damages the artery that takes blood to the affected testicle, it could cause your testicle to shrink. And it's possible for a varicocele to come back after surgery. One study found that about 5 in 100 men had a problem after their operation, such as bruising or swelling in their testicle.

Another type of operation can **block the swollen veins**. It’s a smaller operation than tying off the veins. It's done in hospital, but you'll probably go home the same day. You'll be given a local anaesthetic to numb your groin. If you're uncomfortable, talk to the surgeon or nurse. They'll be able to give you painkillers.

Your surgeon will put a needle into a vein in your groin. A fine tube is then passed through the needle into the swollen veins. The surgeon can then use a metal coil or a tiny balloon to block the veins. Or the surgeon can inject a chemical that causes the vein to collapse.

Problems aren't common, but some men get an allergic reaction to the anaesthetic or a bad bruise where the needle was put in. In one study, about 6 in 100 men had a problem after an operation using a coil or a balloon. The most common one was pain in their abdomen. The research on injecting a chemical to collapse the vein didn't mention any side effects.

**Other treatments**

If you get pain from your varicocele, simple **painkillers** may help. You could try paracetamol or ibuprofen.

Some men find that wearing **supportive underwear** can help. Instead of baggy boxer shorts, you could wear tighter underwear or an athletic support. You can buy supports in sports shops. But if you're trying for a baby, check with your doctor before you start wearing tighter underwear.

**What will happen to me?**

There hasn't been much research to tell us what happens if you don't have a varicocele treated. Some men find that the testicle that has a varicocele shrinks. Some men get pain or discomfort in their testicles. Others don't get any symptoms at all. If you choose not to have treatment, you could always change your mind and get treatment later on.