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THE FACTS ABOUT DVT

CONTINUED obesity, pregnancy, smoking and varicose veins—that can also make DVT more likely. “Using hormone therapy [for menopausal symptoms] or birth control pills is a major risk factor, especially if you combine either with nicotine,” says Dr. Stevens. Before taking either of these medications, discuss your personal risk of DVT with your doctor.

Many genetic disorders can also make your blood more prone to clotting, and if you have one, your risk of DVT is significantly greater than most. Unfortunately, many people don’t know they’ve inherited one of these disorders until they develop a clot. If anyone in your family has a clotting disorder, get screened (with a simple blood test).

warning signs

As with most medical conditions, prevention is only part of the battle. If it’s caught early, DVT can usually be treated successfully with blood-thinning (anticoagulant) medication. Some people won’t have any symptoms, but you should be wary if you develop an area on your arm or leg that’s red, swollen, painful, and/or warm to the touch. If you notice this, don’t wait any more than 24 hours to call your doctor or go to the ER. It could be a clot that may travel to the lungs and become a potentially deadly pulmonary embolism. If that happens, you may feel short of breath, have chest pain that gets worse if you cough or breathe deeply, or get very lightheaded.

“Just as they do with heart attacks, too many women don’t take their symptoms seriously,” says Dr. Mieres. “This has to be on your radar screen so you can tie the pieces together. If you recently took a long trip and a few days later you notice you’re more short of breath than usual, be aware that DVT could be a culprit.” wd



Brenda with her dog, Annie

“I HAD NO IDEA I WAS IN DANGER”

by Brenda Lange, Doylestown, PA

WHEN I WENT TO MY DOCTOR

complaining of shortness of breath and tightness in my chest, I assumed it was stress or maybe asthma. At 43 years old, I was young and healthy—I exercised regularly and ate pretty well. But my doctor ordered a CT scan just to make sure. To my shock, the technician saw blood clots in my lungs and sent me straight to the hospital. At first I didn’t understand what the big deal was—couldn’t they just give me a pill? I later learned that about 30 percent of those who develop a pulmonary embolism die within an hour—and I had three of them.

Doctors in the ER immediately started me on powerful blood thinners to break up the clots before they cut off too much of the blood supply to my lungs. I was admitted to the cardiac unit, where several doctors and nurses monitored my care while I sobbed and waited.

Fortunately, three days later the doctors sent me home, though I had to give myself injections of blood thinners for the next few days and get blood tests and ultrasounds of my legs and pelvis for weeks. When the blood work came back, I learned what went wrong: I had a genetic condition I never knew existed—factor V Leiden, the most common blood clotting disorder.

It turns out that my mother, brother and oldest daughter all have it too, though none of them knew it until they got tested after my incident. My daughter stopped taking birth control pills, but my mom and brother were told by their doctors to simply be on the lookout for symptoms since they don’t have any other risk factors.

I’ll be on the blood thinner Coumadin for life, and I have to go back to the lab for periodic blood tests. (Doctors carefully monitor how I’m responding to the medicine to keep a balance between preventing clots and excessive bleeding.) Coumadin’s a volatile drug, easily affected by other medications and even foods like leafy greens (because they contain vitamin K). The blood thinner also causes me to bruise more easily and intensifies my monthly periods. But for the most part my condition is just a hassle, not something that impedes my daily life.

Still, it’s always there in the back of my mind. After I was hospitalized, I worried over every twinge in my chest for months. Today I’m no longer as anxious about it, but when I tell people what happened I feel my heart beating a little faster and find my hands making fluttering motions around my chest, where the clots once lived.