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EARLY TREATMENT KEY TO VEIN REPAIR

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BODY BEAUTIFUL / A LOOK AT THE LATEST IN COSMETIC SURGERY

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Varicose and spider veins are more than ugly — your health also may be at stake. But treatment is available, and most people won't need surgery.

Early treatment is key, says Dr. Morel Laronn, medical director of the Vein Treatment Center in Denver.

Vein sufferers shouldn't feel alone: one in every four women over 40 — 80 million Americans — has varicose or spider veins.

Varicose veins, common in middle and later life, are superficial, raised distended blue / green vessels common to legs, Laronn says. They are caused by obstruction or prolonged pressure on one-way valves inside the legs that stretch the veins and ultimately cause them to fail.

Genetic predisposition, gender, pregnancies, estrogen, birth control pills, trauma, prolonged standing or sitting, constricting clothes, poor diet and lack of exercise all may contribute to the development of varicose veins.

They're not just ugly. Sometimes they hurt. Many patients suffer aches, throbbing, spasms, cramps, swelling and numbness. Early treatment helps prevent complications and improves circulation. Untreated cases can degenerate into chronic swelling, dermatitis, ulceration, bleeding and a dangerous condition called thrombophlebitis — inflammation of a vein with a blood clot forming within.

Spider veins — or telangiectasis — are often called broken capillaries but this is a misnomer. They're not caused by "broken" blood vessels at all. Loss of elasticity in the wall causes the capillaries to stay dilated and visible. They are like varicose veins on a smaller scale. They appear on the face, thighs, and lower legs as purple, blue or red connected lines and look like a sunburst, a spider web or short, unconnected lines.

"They can look pretty bad," Laronn says, "but the negative impact is more psychological. Younger women stop wearing shorts. They don't want to play tennis, be around the pool, bicycle. Otherwise they are fine and have great legs. It is more of a psychological limitation."

Preventive measures can run the gamut from good eating habits to support stockings.

The most common medical treatment is sclerotherapy, a nonsurgical technique using micro-injections. A sclerosing solution is placed in the affected veins, causing them to shrink, Laronn says. Within three to six weeks after sclerotherapy, the vessel is closed and gradually disappears. No hospitalization is required, and the patient can be back on her feet immediately. For most patients, side effects are minimal. Costs rarely exceed \$1,000.

Surgery is necessary only for severe cases of advanced and large varicose veins.

Laser treatments can be used in some instances, such as microscopic spider veins that usually appear on the face. Few leg conditions can be treated by laser. Side effects include possible vascular damage, scarring and pain. The cost starts at about \$1,000.