

Preventing Hospital-Associated Blood Clots

What is a hospital-associated blood clot?

It is a clot that forms a blockage in the veins, usually in the deep veins of the leg or pelvis. This is called a deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and it occurs because the blood becomes 'sticky' and doesn't flow through the veins as well as normal, for example when you are ill, immobile or dehydrated after an illness or operation. Very occasionally a piece of the clot can break off and flow to the lungs. This is known as a pulmonary embolus (PE). Venous thromboembolism (VTE) is the collective name for DVT and PE.

Although these risks are small, the consequences can be serious. Blood clots can lead to long-term medical problems such as permanent swelling in the leg, varicose veins and even leg ulcers. Rarely a pulmonary embolus can be fatal.

Hospital inpatients are at risk of developing clots either in hospital or up to three months afterwards so it is important that you know about your risk and what to do to prevent clots. It is also important that you know the signs and symptoms of DVT and PE so you can access help quickly.

How do I know if I am at risk?

When you are admitted to hospital, your doctor or nurse will carry out a risk assessment. This will tell them whether you need additional measures to prevent clots, for example blood-thinning medicines, stockings or calf pumps.

There are factors which place you at a greater risk of VTE. These include:

- Staying in one position for long periods of time, for example after an operation or being confined to bed during an illness.
- A family or personal history of VTE
- A medical condition such as heart failure, diabetes, significant infection or cancer
- Certain medications such as the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy.

- Increasing age, especially over 60 years.

What else can I do to prevent clots?

- Keep as active as you can. If you are less mobile you can do gentle leg exercises such as moving your ankles around in a circular motion and moving your toes up and down.
- Stay well hydrated.
- Stop smoking.
- Let your doctor know if you are taking a hormone pill containing oestrogen, such as a contraceptive pill. This may need to be stopped for a short period of time and alternative contraception used.
- Keep a healthy weight.
- Ask your doctor or nurse “what is being done to reduce my risk of VTE?”

What else can be done to reduce my risk?

Blood thinners – a small dose of anticoagulant can be given as a single tablet or injection, or a course lasting a few weeks. It may cause bruising and there is a small risk of bleeding but this is less than the risk from thrombosis: your prescriber will check it is safe for you to have blood thinners. Most injectable types are derived from animals so speak to your prescriber if you would like them to consider an alternative.

Stockings – You may need these as well as, or instead of, blood thinners to prevent blood pooling in the legs. Your leg should be measured beforehand and they must be worn correctly. You should remove them twice a day so that you can have a wash and check for any skin problems.

Calf pumps – Special inflatable sleeves that automatically inflate while you are in a bed or chair. This improves flow through the leg veins, preventing clots.

If medicines are prescribed and / or stockings advised to help reduce your risk, you should use these as directed for the full duration of the course. You may need to continue this at home for a few weeks: the nurses will show you or your carer how to do this.

What are the signs of a clot?

DVT:

- pain
- swelling
- discolouration of a leg usually on one side

PE

- breathlessness
- coughing blood-stained sputum
- chest pain
- palpitations (racing heart beat)
- collapse

If you experience any of these, especially within 3 months of a hospital admission, immediately contact your GP or nearest A&E.



Leaflet Details

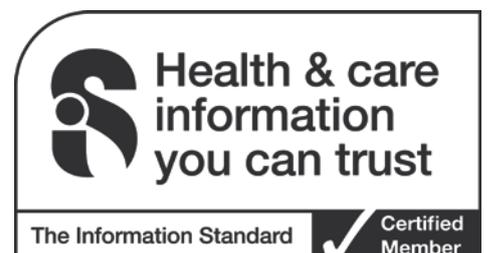
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Useful Contact Details

NHS 111 (for 24 hour urgent health advice): telephone 111

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Evidence

Details of the evidence used in writing this leaflet are available on request from: Patient Information Officer at 01524 512476.

Feedback

We appreciate and encourage feedback. If you need advice or are concerned about any aspect of care or treatment, please speak to a member of staff or contact PALS on 01539 715577.

UHMBT is a no smoking Trust. Smoking is not permitted on any of the hospital sites. You can contact the NHS North Lancashire Stop Smoking services on the number below:

NHS Quit Squad - **0800 328 6297**

If you live in Cumbria, please call **0300 013 3000** to find a local pharmacy who are offers 1-2-1 support and nicotine replacement therapy.

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