

# Blood Clots and Cancer



## What YOU need to know.

# Patients' Guide to Blood Clots and Cancer

### What are blood clots?

Blood clotting is a normal process that occurs in your body to stop bleeding after an injury. Sometimes, a blood clot forms when it isn't needed. These clots can block blood flow and cause potentially life-threatening medical problems.

Cancer patients are at an increased risk for two types of clotting conditions:

1) **Deep vein thrombosis (DVT)** – This involves abnormal clotting of the blood in a deep vein. DVT most commonly occurs in one or more veins of the leg or pelvis, but can also occur in the deep veins of the arm if there is a central venous catheter.

and

2) **Pulmonary embolism (PE)** – This occurs when a DVT breaks free from its original site in a vein and travels through the bloodstream into the lungs.

### As a cancer patient, why should I be concerned about blood clots?

- Cancer patients are four to six times more likely to get blood clots than people without cancer.<sup>1</sup>
- Blood clots may potentially be life threatening.
- Blood clots can result in long-term leg pain, swelling, and difficulty walking.
- Given how common—and dangerous—blood clots can be in cancer patients, it is important to understand blood clots and how to prevent them.

### How do I know if I am at risk?

For cancer patients, the risk factors that increase the chance of having a blood clot include:

- Cancer and cancer treatment
- Previous DVT or PE
- Recent hospitalization
- A catheter for chemotherapy
- Recent major surgery
- Recent immobility such as prolonged travel, sitting, or bed rest
- Chronic infection
- A family history of DVT or PE
- Obesity

<sup>1</sup> Heit JA, et al. Risk factors for deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism: a population-based case-control study. Arch Intern Med. 2000; 160:809-815.

## Why do cancer patients have a high risk for blood clots?

Cancer patients are more likely to experience events that increase risk of DVT and PE. They are more likely to have had a recent hospitalization, a recent major surgery, recent immobility, and a chronic infection—all of which can increase the risk for blood clots.

In addition, aspects of the cancer and the cancer treatment may increase risk as well. The exact reasons for this are not completely understood, but scientists believe the type of cancer, extent of cancer, use of chemotherapy, as well as some chemotherapy treatments may increase the risk for blood clots. Cancer leads to increased production of substances that promote clotting, and cancer treatments cause cell death which releases substances that increase the risk of clotting.

## How will I know that I have a blood clot?

*Symptoms are the same for cancer patients as they are for people without cancer.*

### Symptoms of Possible DVT

- Recent swelling of one leg or arm
- Unexplained pain or tenderness of one leg or arm
- Skin may be warm to the touch

### Symptoms of Possible PE

- Recent or sudden shortness of breath
- Sharp chest pain, especially when inhaling
- Coughing up blood
- Sudden collapse

**DVT and PE should be considered emergencies. If you have any of the above symptoms SEEK MEDICAL CARE IMMEDIATELY!**

## How will my blood clot be diagnosed?

Your healthcare professional may use an ultrasound or a CT scan to see the blood clot inside your body. These tools will help the doctor determine if you have a DVT or PE.

## How will my blood clot be treated?

Both DVT and PE are treated with anticoagulants, also called blood thinners. Anticoagulants decrease the blood's ability to clot in a controlled fashion. These drugs stop clots from getting bigger and prevent new clots from forming.

Compression stockings may be prescribed to reduce the risk of long-term pain and swelling that may be caused by valve damage in the veins due to DVT.

Your healthcare professional may insert a catheter into your vein to remove the blood clot or add a special clot busting medicine. Rarely, a special type of filter may be inserted into the large vein in your abdomen to help catch clots and keep them from traveling to your lungs.

## What can I do to prevent blood clots?

### ***In general***

- Stay active
- Don't smoke or stop smoking if you do
- Maintain a normal body weight
- Drink plenty of liquids

### ***In the hospital***

- Many blood clots in hospitals can be prevented with low doses of an anticoagulant or by other means
- Move your arms and legs often and walk frequently if possible
- Discuss blood clot prevention with your healthcare professional before choosing to undergo an elective surgery
- Report any unexplained chest, leg or arm symptoms to staff

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The Venous Disease Coalition (VDC) is an alliance of leading health professional societies and patient advocacy groups united to improve the survival rates and quality of life for individuals with, or at risk for, venous disease. It is a division of the Vascular Disease Foundation, a national 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization. Printing is courtesy of educational grants and sponsorships from: AngioDynamics Inc., BioMedix, BSN Jobst, Cook Medical, Eisai Inc., and Juzo.