

Motherhood and Thrombophlebitis

By: Marilyn Muldoon

Thrombophlebitis	- circulatory problem when a blood clot slows circulation and inflames a vein
Superficial Thrombophlebitis	- affects veins near the skin surface – tenderness or pain, warmth to the touch, vein hardening
Deep Vein Thrombosis	- affects deeper veins - can cause leg pain or swelling, redness, warmth to the touch but may occur without any symptoms

I entered the realm of motherhood rather late. Like many other creatures, I guess I just didn't breed well in captivity. Joking aside, I did not get around to reproducing until my 37th year when my Sjögren's syndrome was already present but not yet diagnosed. And in spite of my age, I experienced a normal pregnancy except for a little elevated blood pressure.

The lineage of women with varicose veins in my family is legendary. I have had varicosity issues since my late teens, and I really didn't think my legs looked any worse during my pregnancy – well -- not until I went into labour. I awoke at 2:00 a.m. and quickly realized that the "big show" had started. With only two hours of sleep, I was not prepared for the next 18 sleepless hours of labour. I had done the pre-natal classes and knew how to breathe, but push? Nothing prepares you for the amount of exertion required to "move things along". After 45 minutes in the delivery suite, we were done.

Following the birth, and in spite of complete physical exhaustion, I could not sleep. I worried about how to look after this new person who had the gall to arrive without any sort of owner's manual or instruction kit. Eventually, after only a short rest, I turned on the lights to check why my legs, my left leg in particular, were becoming so painful and tender. I was shocked to see the state of my veins -- they were turning black!

I buzzed for the nurse, who sent for the doctor, who quickly sent for anti-embolism stockings. Every so often a nurse would ask me to pump my ankles up and down. They were concerned about deep vein thrombosis. Satisfied that I had upper superficial thrombophlebitis, they measured my legs, and I sat in bed dressed in uncomfortable stockings, with aching legs and a hungry newborn -- all the while wondering if I would die from a blood clot. Aspirin, at the time, was the first line of treatment for thrombosis, but nursing mothers cannot take Aspirin because of the possible development of Reye's syndrome in their babies. At this point, I would have done anything for a decent sleep, a nanny and new legs.

By morning, my left leg no longer felt like it was part of my body. It was a dead weight, and I had to drag it around for the next two weeks until the feeling slowly returned. I am thankful that the anti-nuclear antibodies (ANA) from my Sjögren's syndrome did not pass the placenta. The presence of ANA in the fetal circulation may lead to congenital heart block requiring a pacemaker immediately following birth. The fear of thrombosis was enough post-natal drama!

Why did I get thrombophlebitis? Certain risk factors appear to increase the risk: trauma, childbirth, and varicose veins. Pregnancy and/or postpartum vein inflammation are not uncommon. Unlike when I had my baby, today we have more awareness, vascular specialists to work with the general practitioner or OB/GYN (physician specializing in obstetrics and gynecology), and improved anti-embolism stockings to help with swelling and inflammation. Perhaps my undiagnosed inflammatory arthritis also contributed to my problem. Other possible causes of thrombophlebitis are: blood stasis, blood vein injury, increased blood clotting, indwelling catheters, and infection.

Needless to say, I learned it is important to keep an eye on vein activity. Spider veins are rarely a serious health problem; however, varicose veins sometimes lead to more serious health problems. Varicose veins can be properly monitored by any of these specialists:

- A vascular medicine doctor
- A vascular surgeon
- A dermatologist
- A phlebologist (vein specialist)

And don't forget, whether we're being treated for veins or arthritis, let's keep on moving!