Q+A: UK's leading venous consultant Professor Mark Whiteley explains the link between varicose veins and ulcers

A third of people in the UK will suffer from varicose veins at some point in their lives. They are often passed on in families and if they aren't treated in time, can lead to some serious health concerns, including **leg ulcers**.

Leading UK vein expert Professor Mark Whiteley of The Whiteley Clinic has spoken exclusively with the Lindsay Leg Club to highlight the link between varicose veins and leg ulcers and to encourage people who are concerned about their veins to seek advice, preventing possible future problems.

What are leg ulcers?

"Leg ulcers can come in many forms and affect the lower areas of the leg, commonly from the ankle to the foot. They occur when the skin has broken down to reveal open sores which are unable to naturally heal and can often become infected if not treated correctly.

Ulcers can be big or small, painful, or not painful, smelly or not smelly, wet or dry. There are a great many different appearances of ulcers which can make the condition even more difficult to spot or understand."

Who is susceptible to getting them?

"*As with many vein problems, the general perception is that leg ulcers only affect the elderly, however this isn't always the case. A 19-year-old boy recently came to my clinic with a non-healing sore on his ankle. When I explained this was actually a leg ulcer, he was extremely surprised having always believed the condition to be something older family members were more likely to suffer with."*

How are leg ulcers linked to varicose veins?

"A leg ulcer is usually caused by an injury that breaks the skin. In most people, an injury will heal up without difficulty, however when there is an underlying problem the skin does not heal properly, and the area of breakdown can become an ulcer. There are two underlying problems to be aware of, that can lead to the development of an ulcer:

The most common is when there is a problem with the circulation of blood in your leg veins as it travels back towards your heart – often referred to as hidden varicose veins or venous reflux. This increases the pressure inside the veins which gradually damages the tiny blood vessels in your skin, causing inflammation and increasing susceptibility to developing a 'venous leg ulcer.'

A second, and less common, problem is caused by poor circulation of blood in the arteries, which may result in an 'arterial leg ulcer'. "Arterial ulcers are 10 times less common than venous ulcers, however

they are the most important to diagnose. This is because arterial ulcers are a sign that the leg does not have enough blood supply to keep it alive and, if not restored, can lead to gangrene."

Just how big a problem is this?

"With between 180,000 – 210,000 people in the UK suffering from recurring leg ulcers, it really is a major health problem. The cost of treating the condition is between £400,000 - £900,000 a year in the UK. As well as affecting a person's life, the impact on the economy is astonishing.

It is a problem that requires a huge amount of resources not only in nursing time, leg ulcer dressings and compression bandaging or stockings but also can prevent people from working or leading an active life."

**Anyone who has concerns about varicose veins or who has noticed any changes in their legs can visit their GP for help and advice*

**For more information from Professor Whiteley about how surgery can help treat some people with leg ulcers visit www.thewhiteleyclinic.co.uk*

And visit www.legclub.org https://www.legclub.org/information-leaflets