

Preventing blood clots in pregnancy and after giving birth to your baby

Information for patients

The purpose of this information sheet is to inform women who are pregnant of the risk of Venous Thrombo-Embolicism (blood clots) which occur in 1-2 in 1000 women during their pregnancy or up to six weeks after the birth of their baby.

What is Venous Thrombo-Embolicism (VTE)?

Venous Thrombo-Embolicism or VTE is a general name for a group of conditions that includes:

Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT): A thrombus (blood clot) that can form in a deep vein of the body, usually in the leg or pelvic area. This can cause the vein to become blocked.

Pulmonary Embolism (PE): When part of the blood clot from the DVT breaks away and travels to the lungs. This can be life threatening, however, dying from a PE is very rare in women who are pregnant or who have just had a baby.

Why do blood clots form in the veins?

Blood flows quickly through the veins and the surrounding muscles help this movement, which stops the blood from clotting. During pregnancy, it is normal for blood to become thicker meaning it is more likely to clot. Sometimes additional factors can increase the chance of having a blood clot (see below).

What makes you more at risk of developing a blood clot?

Before pregnancy if you:

- Are over 35 years of age
- Have already had three or more babies
- Have had a previous VTE
- Have a mother, father, brother or sister who has had a VTE
- Have a condition that makes your blood more likely to clot (e.g. thrombophilia)
- Have certain medical conditions (your doctor will be able to tell you whether you have a condition that increases your risk)
- Have severe varicose veins
- Use a wheelchair.

Lifestyle

- If you are overweight, with a body mass index (BMI) over 30
- If you use intravenous drugs.

During pregnancy if you:

- Are admitted to hospital
- Have more than one baby (e.g. twins, triplets)
- Become dehydrated or are less mobile, for example due to vomiting in early pregnancy, or if you are unwell with another infection.
- Are immobile for long periods of time, for example after an operation, or when travelling for 4 hours or longer (by air, train or car).
- Have pre-eclampsia.

After the birth of the baby

If you have a very long labour (more than 24 hours), have had a caesarean delivery, lose a lot of blood or receive a blood transfusion.

What are the signs and symptoms of a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)?

- Pain and tenderness in the calf, thigh or groin
- Swelling in the calf or leg
- A sensation of heat and sometimes skin discolouration. This usually affects the calf but sometimes it can affect the whole leg
- Unexplained limping while walking.

What are the signs and symptoms of a Pulmonary Embolism (PE)?

- Sudden shortness of breath which continues even while resting
- Chest pain which becomes worse when breathing in
- Coughing up blood
- Collapse.

How can I reduce the risk of a blood clot?

You can reduce your chance of developing a clot in pregnancy by keeping as mobile as possible, maintain a healthy weight, stop smoking, drink plenty of fluids to keep hydrated, change position regularly when lying in bed, and follow the advice of your doctor or midwife.

Risk assessments

Your risk of developing a blood clot will be assessed at several points throughout your pregnancy. Your first assessment will be at your booking appointment. You will also be assessed if you develop any problems during your pregnancy, if you are admitted to hospital and after you have given birth to your baby.

Treatment to prevent blood clots

Injections

If you are found to be at risk of blood clots we may prescribe you an injection of low molecular weight heparin (LMWH) to “thin your blood”. Usually you inject this once a day into the skin on your tummy. Your midwife will show you (and/or a family member) how to give these. This treatment does not cross the placenta - it is safe for your baby and will not affect your breastfeeding.

Anti-embolism stockings

These are tight fitting stockings which can help to improve the circulation of the blood in your veins. As these can prevent you developing a blood clot, your midwife may advise you to wear these.

If you have any of the symptoms described or are worried, please telephone:

Labour Ward, St John's Hospital

01506 524 125

Simpson Centre for Reproductive Health, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh

0131 242 2657