

Varicocele

Varicocele is a dilated (enlarged) group of veins in the scrotum (the sac containing the testicles) in teenage boys and young men. Varicoceles are usually painless, although your child may feel a lump around one testicle—usually the left one. Varicoceles can lead to reduced fertility. Surgery may help to prevent this complication.

What is a varicocele?

A varicocele is an abnormality of the blood vessels in the scrotum, usually developing in teenage boys and young men. Varicoceles are a common cause of reduced fertility (the ability to have children) in men. They do not lead to any other health problems.

Varicoceles are usually painless. Your son may feel a lump near one of his testicles. Over time, the testicle with a varicocele may start to shrink. By the time this happens, the testicle's ability to produce sperm may be affected. Surgery to remove the varicocele may help to prevent problems with fertility.

What does it look like?

- Varicocele is usually painless but can cause a dull ache in the affected testicle.
- Your child (or the doctor) may feel a lump or mass around the testicle. The lump is sometimes described as feeling like a “bag of worms.” It may be felt only when your child is standing, and it may go away or feel smaller when he lies down.
- Varicoceles nearly always occur on the left testicle. Sometimes both sides have varicoceles.
- The testicle on the side with the varicocele may be smaller than the other testicle.
- Varicoceles most commonly develop in the middle teen to young adult years. They rarely develop before puberty.

What causes a varicocele?

Varicoceles develop when a valve in one of the veins connected to the testicles does not work properly. Too much blood builds up, causing the veins to widen (dilate). Over time, this damages the affected testicle. The testicle may shrink, and its ability to make sperm may be reduced.

What are some possible complications of varicocele?

Reduced fertility is the main complication. About 15% of men with varicoceles will have trouble fathering a child.

What puts your child at risk of varicocele?

About 15% of men have a varicocele. There are no specific risk factors.

Can varicocele be prevented?

- There is no known way to predict varicoceles from developing.
- Surgery to remove the varicocele may prevent later fertility problems.

How is varicocele treated?

- We may recommend a visit to a urologist, a specialist in treating diseases of the reproductive organs.
- If varicocele is present only on the right testicle or if it develops before age 10, further evaluation is needed to search for the cause. There could be a mass somewhere in the abdomen causing the varicocele.
- Surgery may be recommended to remove the varicocele in certain situations:
 - If varicocele is present on both sides of the scrotum, near both testicles.
 - If the testicle on the side with the varicocele is smaller than the other testicle.
 - If pain is present.
 - If the varicocele is very large.
- The operation to correct varicocele (called varicocelectomy) is very simple. A small incision is made and the abnormal blood vessel is blocked off. Usually, there is no need for your child to stay overnight in the hospital.
- Anesthesia will prevent your son from feeling any pain during the procedure. Afterward, ice packs and medications can be used to reduce pain and swelling.
- Your child should recover quickly after the operation. There is a small risk of complications; the urologist can advise you of these risks.
- Surgery to correct varicocele can still be successful later in life if your son has fertility problems. However, performing surgery at a younger age reduces the chance of ever developing such problems.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

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- Your son develops pain or swelling of the scrotum or testicles. Although varicocele is usually painless, pain can occur. There are other possible causes of pain in this area, some of which are serious.
- Boys with pain in the testicles always need prompt medical attention. 