Deep Vein Thrombosis

The Basics

Much about this condition has been reported in the media over the last few years, especially with the increase in long distance travel and several high profile court cases. DVT is a condition where blood clots develop in the deep veins of the legs obstructing the flow of blood. In some situations, the blood clot can cause death if it travels through the bloodstream to another organ, such as the lung (pulmonary embolus).

Long hours of immobility and lack of exercise in cramped seating conditions are factors that make DVT more likely to occur. This, of course, is not unique to air travel. Passengers seated in cars, buses and trains are also at risk. Although the cramped conditions often found in economy class seats has given rise to the name “Economy Class Syndrome,” DVT can affect passengers in premium cabins as well.

In addition to immobility some individuals are more at risk to DVT, such as those that are dehydrated. The circulating air in aircraft cabins is kept dry, and this can lead to passengers becoming significantly dehydrated. Consumption of alcohol before or during the flight will worsen this. Some passengers may be flying from areas that have a hot and arid climate and may be dehydrated on boarding the plane. Others may be dehydrated as a result of contracting a bout of traveler’s diarrhea.

Additional risk factors include: age (over 40), previous DVT or family history of blood clots, recent surgery or injury, pregnancy, oral contraception, hormone replacement medication, cardio-respiratory disease and other chronic illnesses including malignancy. Those persons with three or more of the above risk factors should discuss additional protective measures with their doctors.

Although there are some cases where there are no signs or symptoms of DVT the most common symptoms can include: swelling of the leg, warmth and redness of the leg and pain that is noticeable or worse when standing or walking.

Some preventative measures against DVT include:

• Regular stretching and mobility exercises and if possible walking around the cabin during the flight.
• Drinking sufficient fluids such as water or juice.
• Wear loose fitting comfortable clothes when traveling.

For individuals that have any of the additional risk factors previously mentioned, you may want to talk to your doctor before traveling about these other preventative measures:

• Taking a low dose aspirin to inhibit blood clotting.
• The use of compression stockings. These are available at some pharmacies.

References to News Articles

U.S. High Court Ruling May Revive Airline Lawsuits, Fri Mar 12, 2004, By Gina Keating, LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Passengers suing airlines because they developed blood clots on long flights got a boost from a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that broadens the definition of in-flight accidents, legal experts said on Friday...

Society of Hospital Medicine Works With Public Health Leaders to Mark the Nation's First Deep-Vein Thrombosis (DVT) Awareness Month, PHILADELPHIA, March 10 /PRNewswire/ -- The Society of Hospital Medicine (SHM), in conjunction with the newly formed Coalition to Prevent Deep-Vein Thrombosis, has designated March as the first
Deep-Vein Thrombosis (DVT) Awareness Month as part of a public health initiative to educate healthcare professionals and consumers about this life-threatening but preventable medical condition. Sharing her own personal experience with DVT, award-winning actress and singer Lainie Kazan stars in both radio and television public service announcements urging a more proactive approach in preventing DVT...

Long Flights And Thrombosis, By SUSAN GILBERT, February 29, 2004 -- THREE days after flying from Pittsburgh to Charleston, S.C., for spring break six years ago, Cynthia Kos, then 19, began having crushing pains in her chest and left leg. The leg swelled and turned purple. Because she was a fit collegiate volleyball player who rarely got sick, she could not imagine what was happening.

More Information

Aviation Health Institute DVT Fact File

British Airways Traveller's thrombosis (DVT)

British United Provident Association DVT fact sheet

WebMD Deep Leg Vein Thrombosis

© Copyright 2020, AFA-CWA Air Safety, Health and Security Dept.. This information may not be republished without express consent.