

SEEMINGLY OUT OF nowhere, a smattering of reddish-purple squiggles has shown up on your calves and ankles. Your legs are beginning to look like an Etch A Sketch gone haywire. Where did they come from, and why?

The issue stems from floppy valves that don't open and close properly. "This causes blood to pool in the vein, making it stretch, and sometimes even protrude through the skin," explains Luis Navarro, M.D., founder and medical director of the Vein Treatment Center in New York. In order to see the underlying vascular system, Navarro performs an ultrasound on first-time patients. "Spider veins near the surface are typically offshoots of a larger 'feeder' vessel that needs to be treated as well," he adds. If your mother or grandmother have them, there's a good chance you will too. "Varicose and spider veins are 60 to 80 percent genetically predisposed," says Navarro. "And pregnancy tends to exacerbate the condition due to an increase in blood flow." Getting older doesn't help either. "After the age of 50, half of women start noticing spider veins." The good news is that the body doesn't need these superficial vessels and they can be effectively eliminated with minimal pain. Really.

When it comes to treatment, size matters. For delicate red-purple spider veins that appear as web-like starbursts on the upper calves, ankles, or outer thighs, sclerotherapy is the gold standard. (Lasers aren't effective on the legs because the veins are larger and skin is thicker.) The procedure involves injecting a detergent-based solution directly into the vein, irritating the inner lining enough to destroy it. "The veins blanch and instantly disappear," says Tina Alster, M.D., founding director of the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery in Washington, D.C. "They fill up again with blood in a few seconds, and then over the next two to four weeks the body breaks down the damaged veins and they fade away," she says.



## GET YOUNGER LOOKING LEGS

*Genetics, hormones, and just plain aging all contribute to veiny legs.*

*Fortunately, it's never been easier to deal with them. By Gina Way*

"Most people require two or three treatments spaced four weeks apart, although sometimes a single session can do the trick." Expect some bruising, redness, and swelling for up to two weeks, but it's nothing that a long skirt can't discreetly hide. (Cost: \$250–\$1,500 per session.)

Large blue-purple varicose veins require a slightly more aggressive approach—and investment. First, there's endovenous laser ablation (EVLA), which is done by a vein specialist or a vascular surgeon. Here's how it works: Following an injection of a local anesthetic, a thin catheter is inserted into the length of the offending vein. As it's withdrawn, pulses of laser energy are released to collapse the vein, and the body reabsorbs the scar tissue over the next four weeks. Often done in tandem with EVLA, a phlebectomy can eliminate the bulging, twisty class of varicose veins. "I make a tiny incision, and with little surgical hooks, I remove that vein," Navarro explains. "It comes out like a string of spaghetti." While it may sound a little *Game of Thrones*-ish, a phlebectomy is performed with just a local anesthetic. "Both procedures take about 25 minutes and require a single treatment," says Navarro, who adds this caveat: "Over the years, new veins will likely appear and need to be touched up." (Cost: A phlebectomy ranges from \$2,000 to \$4,000 for one leg; EVLA plus a phlebectomy is \$4,000 to \$6,000, and your insurance may cover the cost.)

As you weigh the treatment options, keep these pointers in mind: Elevate your legs whenever possible to alleviate swelling and pressure; and exercise regularly. "This assists the circulation and helps move the blood upward," says New York dermatologist Ellen Marmur, M.D., who uses sclerotherapy in her practice and has experienced EVLA firsthand to treat her own varicose veins. "Trust me, self-tanner did not hide them. I was too self-conscious to wear shorts or a skirt on a hot summer day, so for me it's been worth the investment." ■