

Coronation Street thrombosis story line

Claire develops a thrombosis during her pregnancy, unfortunately loses the baby and goes on to develop a pulmonary embolism (July 2009)

Regular viewers of Coronation Street will be following the current storyline involving Ashley's wife, Claire, who develops a blood clot during her pregnancy - although she does not know she is pregnant, nor is she aware of any symptoms of a blood clot. This results in a miscarriage and then she suffers a pulmonary embolism. If you or a loved one has been affected by this storyline, please find below some useful information about the risk of blood clots in pregnancy.

What is a blood clot?

Blood clots normally form to stop bleeding when a blood vessel is damaged, they act as a plug at the site of the blood vessel injury. However a deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a blood clot in a deep vein which forms when the patient is not bleeding, usually in the leg or pelvis, that partially or totally blocks the flow of blood. Who is at risk from blood clots? Blood clots affect 1 in every 1000 people annually. Apart from pregnancy, there are a number of other risk factors associated with the development of blood clots. These include:

- Increasing age
- Immobility
- Use of oral contraceptives or hormone replacement therapy
- Previous blood clots
- Acute illness such as myocardial infarction, stroke, inflammatory bowel disease
- Obesity
- Surgery – particularly orthopedic procedures such as hip and knee replacement
- Inherited or acquired thrombophilias (sticky blood)

Blood clots in pregnancy

Pregnant women are at a slightly increased risk of developing a blood clot - on average, one to two women in every 1000 will get a blood clot during pregnancy or just after delivery. This is because the blood clotting system becomes more sticky, possibly as the body's way of minimising bleeding at the time of normal delivery. In addition, when you're carrying a baby, there is a dramatic reduction in the speed of blood flow in your veins due to the effect of pregnancy hormones. The womb also gets bigger as the pregnancy advances - the resultant increase in pressure in the pelvic area can slow the flow of blood from the leg veins back to the heart. This sluggish flow in the veins is why many women experience swollen legs during pregnancy. It is this decrease in blood flow, combined with increased clotting tendency while pregnant, that can lead to blood clots in the leg. It is important to remember that if a blood clot is diagnosed, it can be successfully treated.

Symptoms and diagnosis of a DVT

The usual symptoms of a DVT include pain, swelling and tenderness of the leg, and discolouration of the skin (a pale blue or reddish purple colour). Should you experience any of these during pregnancy, inform your GP, midwife or obstetrician immediately. The diagnosis of a DVT during pregnancy will usually be confirmed by an ultrasound scan of the leg. This is the same type of scan used to check your baby's progress throughout the pregnancy so is completely safe.

Treatment

The treatment of a blood clot during pregnancy is similar to when you are not pregnant. A medication called heparin is given – an anticoagulant which thins the blood. It prevents the clot from getting any bigger and may help break down the clot, and gives your body time to gradually dissolve the clot. Heparin can either be injected or given through the veins via an infusion pump. Heparin cannot cross through the placenta so it is safe for the developing baby. If your blood thinning treatment continues after delivery, you may continue on heparin or take warfarin – a tablet which also thins the blood. Both are safe to take when breast feeding. Specially designed compression stockings will also be used and these are worn to help improve blood flow and reduce swelling of the legs. These need to be fitted by your doctor and cannot be bought over the counter at the pharmacy.

DVT and miscarriage

DVTs can be hard to diagnose - up to 80% of patients have either no symptoms or non-specific symptoms. If a portion of the clot breaks off and travels in the veins and blocks the blood supply to the placenta, a miscarriage can occur.

What is a pulmonary embolism (PE)?

A PE occurs when a portion of the clot breaks off and travels in the veins up to the heart, where it is pumped into the

lungs, and gets stuck in the small blood vessels. One third of people with DVT will develop a PE, symptoms of which include breathlessness, chest pain and a rapid heart rate, or sudden collapse. Some people may also cough up blood.

Where can I get further information?

Further information can be found in our downloadable patient leaflets.

Leaflet linkIf you are worried about your risk of developing a DVT please consult your GP, midwife or obstetrician.