

'I half ignored this until it became almost impossible for me to bear weight on my left leg while my knee was fully extended. And I couldn't flex my foot upward toward my leg. ... On Thursday, June 19th, I gave in and called the doctor.'

Listen to your body... it could save your life!

Lorri Lee Lown shares her life-threatening experience with DVT (deep vein thrombosis)

It saved mine.

After completing the AIDS LifeCycle (600 miles in seven days on a bicycle) on Saturday, June 14th, I flew home to San Francisco from Los Angeles on Sunday, June 15th. I was a little fatigued and not ready to re-enter life, so after a late lunch and a couple of beers with a friend, I promptly took a nap. On Monday, June 16th, I sat at my desk at the bike shop for about six hours, took a short, 60-minute recovery spin, and then sat at my desk at home for another six hours or so. Late Monday evening I began to feel a sharp, stabbing pain in the upper back of my left calf. It felt like a really bad cramp, but the location was much higher than a typical calf cramp.

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is true with just about anything in life, including your health.

As an athlete, what can you do to avoid DVT?

► Stay hydrated with both water and an electrolyte replacement; don't sit with your legs or ankles crossed; if you fly, keep moving your legs during the flight and afterwards; don't drink alcohol or sleep while flying; if you smoke, stop now; if you're bed-ridden for any period of time, keep moving as much as possible; if you're obese, lose some weight; avoid prolonged sitting or standing in one position; raise the foot of your bed to elevate your feet above the level of your hips; don't wear tight hose or socks that constrict your circulation; perform a cool-down after every workout (this allows the blood in your working muscles to gradually move back to your internal organs instead of pooling in your legs).

What can you do to recognize the signs of DVT?

► Listen to your body! If diagnosed early enough, a DVT can be treated and your chance of permanent damage to your veins is much lower. Most DVTs are in the gastrocnemius vein (in the calf), the popliteal vein (behind the knee) or the femoral vein (in the thigh). Signs of a DVT include severe pain, the inability to flex your foot up toward your leg, discoloration of the affected area, and a higher temperature in the affected area. If a DVT breaks away from the vein and progresses into a pulmonary embolism (PE), look for shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing up blood, dizziness, and fever. *Don't ignore these symptoms!*

If you think you might have a DVT or PE, seek medical attention immediately. Don't assume that because you're an athlete that this can't happen to you. Of all the risk groups associated with DVT, athletes are at 85% higher risk than others for DVT. Ask your doctor to order a Doppler sonogram to diagnose a possible DVT. Be assertive – it's your life on the line.

And above all, be thankful for every single day that you're alive and healthy!

Wednesday, June 18th, when it became almost impossible for me to bear weight on my left leg while my knee was fully extended. And I couldn't flex my foot upward toward my leg. In the back of my mind, I decided either I had an Achilles tendon injury (very rare in cyclists) or a blood clot. On Thursday, June 19th, I gave in and called the doctor.

Well, after almost 6 hours at the doctor on Friday, June 20th, including a sonogram of my leg, I've found out that I have a DVT (deep vein thrombosis). This is a massive blood clot in the gastrocnemius vein deep inside my calf muscle. Had this clot dislodged, I wouldn't be sitting at my keyboard right now. Instead, I would have likely suffered a pulmonary embolism and possibly have died.

Could this have been prevented?

► Perhaps. In retrospect, I allowed myself to become slightly dehydrated during Days six and seven of the ride (Friday and Saturday). And at dinner on Saturday I had a couple of beers (which will also dehydrate you). I didn't really perform a cool-down on any day of the ride and remained pretty sedentary during the evenings and the days immediately following the ride. But, the likelihood is that this blood clot began weeks or months prior (perhaps during my longer flights to & from Alaska in May) and simply hit critical mass after the ride.

It's interesting, because just a week before the ride, I read an article about DVT and endurance athletes. During endurance exercise (marathons, multi-day events, etc), glycogen and water are pulled from your muscles and your blood becomes more dense (due to dehydra-

tion). Immediately following an endurance event, your body compensates for this by pulling water and glycogen back into your muscles (giving you that bloated look and feel that often lasts for several days). This is one reason to do some form of active recovery (easy heart rate cardio utilizing your working muscles) the day after such an event. And because trained athletes also have a lower resting heart rate, if we're sedentary, our blood can stagnate and become thicker. This is the reason that doctors recommend we don't fly immediately after an endurance event.

But there are also genetic and lifestyle contributors to the formation of blood clots. During my sonogram, the medical technician noted that I have two veins in my left thigh/groin that are incompetent (the two-way valves are malfunctioning). This could have been caused by 15 years of sitting at a desk and crossing my right leg over the left, cutting off circulation. In retrospect, I've had edema in my left leg for a number of years. This should have been a warning sign that I had a circulation problem. There are also other factors that contribute to DVT – obesity, smoking, sedentary lifestyle, taking birth-control pills, recent surgery, genetic predisposition and pregnancy.

Lesson learned – listen to your body.

► Don't procrastinate and hope something will just go away. Pain of any type during cycling signals that something is wrong. And although I didn't have pain while riding, I should have known that this post-ride pain wasn't good. A problem just go away if you ignore it. Instead, it continues to magnify until it hits a boiling point. This

RESOURCES

For more information on DVT and athletes, go to <http://www.airhealth.org/athletes.html>

Lorri Lee Lown is a USA Cycling Expert Coach, Personal Fitness Trainer, Spinning Instructor and trainer of the VeloGirls cycling club (www.VeloGirls.com)

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7335 Bollinger Rd. • Ste. D Cupertino

