



Beating Blood Clots: Lessons Learned From Al Roker's Recent Health Scare

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In November, Today Show weatherman Al Roker was hospitalized after a blood clot that formed in his leg sent clots to his lungs. After being discharged on Thanksgiving he was readmitted almost immediately because he started showing more symptoms.



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), blood clots are a serious and growing health issue affecting an estimated 900,000 Americans each year resulting in nearly 100,000 deaths. Blood clots are a normal response to an injury where a blood vessel gets broken. If it doesn't clot, you will continuously bleed causing a hemorrhage.

The problem is when blood clots occur for the wrong reasons such as a piece of plaque breaking off in the artery to the heart which can cause a heart attack. According to Mark Meeker, D.O., an internal medicine physician and vice president of community medicine at OSF HealthCare, another example is in the legs. He says blood usually flows relatively rapidly through our body but if something changes that flow, that's when you could have a problem.

“If you think about if you mix cocoa and milk, and you stir it, it all dissolves. If you just dump it in there, it clumps up. So if our blood isn't flowing, it can tend to clump or clot. So if I have surgery, for example, and I'm laid up in bed, and I'm not moving, and the blood flow in the veins of my legs really slows down and starts to pool I can get a blood clot that shouldn't be there. It's blood that stays there. I might be okay, but if a blood clot breaks off and goes to my heart or lungs that's called a pulmonary embolus. That's very serious and can be life-threatening.”

Dr. Meeker says the signs to watch out for that you might have a problem depends on where the clot is located and what it's affecting. In an artery, that is the high pressure system that delivers oxygen from the lungs, through the heart, and out to your body.

Dr. Meeker recalls a patient of his who developed pain in her leg but no swelling, the leg became pale looking and cold to the touch. The arterial clot prevented the leg from getting oxygen and the leg ended up having to be amputated because the arteries clotted off. The other side is the low-pressure venous system bringing the blood back to the heart and lungs to be re-oxygenated and recirculated.

On the venous side, a clot can cause a backup not unlike clogging the drain to a sink. This will cause blood to build up in your leg and the leg to swell, maybe change color, and potentially cause pain in the calf if the swelling starts to increase pressure inside the muscle. If the clot then breaks off and goes to your heart and lungs, as in Al Roker's case, you could have chest pain, shortness of breath, and heart palpitations.

“Big swollen leg with discomfort, the discoloration is not normal. If you have one leg swollen and not the other and you've either had recent surgery or a recent illness, or you are sitting for a long period of time, usually. Either you really got into a movie marathon or you're on a plane to Hawaii or something like that, or a long car ride. Some people get in the car and they drive for hours. They don't take a break to go for a small walk. All those are risk factors for those venous clots.” Dr. Meeker says there are risk factors that increase your chances of developing blood clots like smoking or taking birth control pills. But he adds blood clots don't care, under the right circumstances they will happen to anybody.“

Meeker continued: "If you have a family history of stroke or heart attack, you want to be checked out by your primary care team to see if you have genetic risk factors for heart attack or stroke because you have them in your family. And if you do there are specific things that can be done depending on what that risk profile looks like. From a general standpoint from the side of the venous clot, maintain a healthy weight, stay hydrated, and don't get dehydrated. Don't sit for unusually prolonged periods of time.

You want to be up and moving around because movement is what gets the circulation that veins in the legs need to stay active and not clot.”

Learn more about the signs and symptoms of blood clots and remember to reach out to your primary care provider if you are experiencing any of them, or visit your nearest emergency department if necessary.