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## ASK THE DOCTOR

### Preventing and Treating Bruises

By Gary Goldfaden, MD

**Q:** I frequently get black and blue marks and bruise very easily. Can you explain why this happens and what can be done about it?

**A:** Many people may take a hard hit on the arm or leg and develop a purple bruise that may last for a few days. Others develop black and blue marks from the slightest touch, which may last up to a few weeks.

A bruise is a black and blue mark caused by an injury to tissue beneath the skin. Purpura is the medical term for bleeding in the skin. A bruise is caused by the rupture or breakage of blood vessels, resulting in skin discoloration. This discoloration occurs because blood cells leak out of small broken blood vessels or capillaries, and are trapped under the skin or deeper tissues.

Simple bruises from slight trauma can be easily treated with ice. Ice constricts broken blood vessels and lessens leakage under the skin. If ice is used, a bruise will still form, but will be smaller and less painful.

Frequent or easy bruising can present a cosmetic challenge and may signal a medical condition.

People who have thin arms and legs may bruise more easily because they may not have enough fat to cushion and protect superficial blood vessels from damage. Older adults are more prone to bruising because of weakening of the blood vessels. People who have severely sun-damaged skin are more susceptible to bruising, which is a very important reason to ensure that skin is adequately protected from the sun.

Blood-clotting problems can contribute to easy bruising. The liver plays a major role in the blood-clotting process by producing some factors involved in the blood-clotting cascade. Anything that damages the liver, like prolonged heavy drinking, may cause an imbalance in the blood-clotting process and contribute to easy bruising.

Medications are a common cause of easy bruising. The most commonly problematic medications are aspirin and other over-the-counter medications for pain and inflammation. Side effects of these and other drugs, such as steroids, may lead to easier bruising.

Consult your physician if you experience bruises that appear spontaneously without trauma. Blood-clotting tests, as well as close monitoring of your medications and dosages, may be warranted.

Poor diet can also promote easy bruising. Vitamin C plays a major role in strengthening blood vessels. If you bruise easily, it may be helpful to increase your consumption of vitamin C-rich foods and supplements. Bioflavonoids derived from citrus fruit plants may also be beneficial. As a therapeutic trial, use these supplements for at least three months. If there is no improvement in that time, further investigation into the causes of easy bruising may be warranted.

Vitamin K is a fat-soluble nutrient that is essential for blood clotting. Since vitamin K requires the presence of fat in order to be utilized by the body, people who have problems with fat absorption or who use medications (such as antibiotics) that impair fat absorption may be deficient in vitamin K. You should discuss your vitamin K status with your physician and take supplemental vitamin K only under a physician's supervision.

Topical vitamin K cream is an excellent therapy to promote rapid resolution of black and blue marks. Topical vitamin K has been found to speed the healing of bruises. Its effects are even greater when used in combination with topical arnica, which is a plant-based remedy used for over 200 years. Arnica traditionally has been used to speed injury and trauma healing, reduce bruising, and relieve pain. The combination of vitamin K and Arnica works to reduce pain and swelling, and to improve healing of bumps and bruises. This formula is very helpful in improving the appearance of fine blood vessels and redness. The combination of



vitamin K and Arnica also has been helpful in decreasing the severity of bruising following surgical procedures.

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