What is a varicocele?
A varicocele is a swelling or lump that surrounds the testicle in the scrotum. It is almost always on the left side (96% of all cases).
It is due to a knot of varicose veins similar to varicose veins in the legs. The vein that drains the testicle becomes abnormally distended with pooled blood.

What are the symptoms and signs?
The patient is aware of a lump, especially when standing, but notices that the swelling usually disappears when lying down.
The degree of discomfort or pain varies considerably from one person to another.
There may be no discomfort, but others experience a most uncomfortable dragging pain, especially in hot weather or after exercise.
The lump, which may have a bluish appearance through the skin, is soft to feel, like a bunch of grapes or a “bag of worms”. Investigations are usually not necessary but sometimes an ultrasound may be ordered if there is any doubt about the diagnosis.

Who usually gets a varicocele?
It is usually first noticed in males between puberty and the age of 35, especially in late adolescence. Any male can be affected, although it is seen more frequently in tall, thin men, especially those from hot climates.
Varicoceles are common and found in about 8% of the adult male population.

What is the cause?
The cause is a mechanical problem in the drainage of the testicular vein into the renal vein of the kidney. A faulty valve in the testicular vein leads to back pressure in the system and thus swollen varicose veins around the testicle.
There is no known reason why some men get it, although there is a tendency for varicoceles to run in families.

What is the risk?
A primary varicocele is basically a relatively minor problem without serious consequences. However, in some men the discomfort is such that surgical treatment is required — others can live with a very mild discomfort. Varicoceles are thought to be associated with decreased fertility although this has not been proved absolutely.

What is the treatment?
No treatment is necessary if the varicocele is causing no discomfort.
For mild discomfort and swelling, the patient can wear firm-fitting underpants or a jockstrap. Keep in mind that the discomfort and swelling tends to disappear when lying down.

Surgical treatment?
Surgery is usually recommended if the varicocele is causing significant discomfort, or is associated with a reduced size of the left testicle or with infertility.
The operation is a straightforward but delicate procedure in which the vein draining the varicose veins is ligated. This causes the veins to collapse without affecting the testicle’s function. Results from surgery are very good, with at least an 80% success rate.