

Patient information

Venous Leg Ulcers

Tissue Viability

What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is a cut or sore on the leg, which takes more than two weeks to heal. It may start following an injury or you may find your skin breaks down for no obvious reason.

What causes leg ulcers?

The most common problem causing a leg ulcer is disease of the veins in the leg. (There are other less common causes for leg ulcers).

Your nurse or doctor will examine you, ask you questions and do some tests to see what sort of ulcer you have.

This leaflet gives advice to help heal your ulcer if it has been caused by damage to the veins in your legs.

How does disease of the veins cause an ulcer?

The veins in your leg are tubes that carry the blood back from the foot to your heart. The veins contain one-way valves that should allow flow up the leg and not back down it. However, these valves are not very effective in some people or can be damaged. If the valves are damaged, blood can flow the wrong way down the veins. This results in a very high pressure in the veins.

This abnormally high pressure in the veins may damage the skin and cause a leg ulcer.

How will I be treated?

Treatment of a venous leg ulcer is aimed at controlling the high pressure in the leg veins. You may need a moisturiser for the surrounding skin which may be dry, itchy or scaly.

The best treatment is to apply pressure (compression) using several layers of bandages or support stockings. These work by applying pressure on the veins to stop the build up of pressure in them getting too high.

When you have an ulcer you may need several layers of bandages to reduce the pressure in the veins in order to help the ulcer to heal.

Once the ulcer is healed, compression stockings will need to be worn to prevent the ulcer from coming back again.

You will need to be measured and have them fitted as they are much stronger than ordinary 'support tights'. You may find it difficult to put them on but your nurse will advise you about special applicators to help you.

Very occasionally, for the largest or very difficult to heal ulcers, either a skin graft or an operation on the veins may be necessary. If your ulcer is due to varicose veins, these may be treated but not until the ulcer has healed.

How long will it take the ulcer to heal?

It has usually taken many years for the damage to your veins to cause the ulcer, so it is not surprising that the ulcer may take a fairly long time to heal. Although most venous ulcers will heal in three to four months time, some will take much longer.

How you can help to heal the ulcer and stop it coming back

The following advice will help your ulcer to heal:

- Wear compression bandages or hosiery as advised by your nurse or doctor.
- Hosiery must be put on in the morning before you start walking about or your legs may swell and this makes it more difficult to put them on.
- Raise your legs above the heart whenever you can in order to lower the pressure in the leg veins. Lying on a couch is best, as you can get your legs up higher.
- Get somebody to elevate the lower end of your bed (six inches is enough) so that when in bed your feet are a little higher than your head.
- Stop your skin from drying out by using a good moisturising cream. Your nurse or doctor will tell you which is the best type for you. Be careful not to use one that can cause you to have a reaction to it.
- If you are overweight seek advice about losing weight.
- Eating a healthy diet with at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day will help your ulcer to heal.
- Stop smoking, as this is extremely harmful to your circulation.
- Walk as much as you can. This will help to improve your circulation.
- Exercise your ankles as often as you can even if you find they may be stiff at first.

It is important for you to keep following this advice even when your ulcer is healed. Once the skin has healed the underlying damage to the veins remains so you must keep doing all you can to keep the pressure in your veins low.

If you do not wear your compression hosiery, your ulcer is likely to reoccur.

Things you should not do.

- **Cross your legs**

This is bad for you because it slows or stops the circulation in your legs.

- **Sit around too much**

Walking is the best way to improve your circulation and sitting around has the opposite effect. If you have to sit down for long periods exercise your ankles whilst you sit.

- **Gain too much weight**

Putting on weight is bad for your circulation, so try to avoid it. A good diet will keep your weight steady and also helps your ulcer to heal.

- **Get constipated**

This will increase the pressure in the veins of your legs.

- **Wear tight shoes or clothing**

Anything that restricts the circulation in your legs, such as corsets or belts is bad for you and your ulcer.

- **Interfere with your dressing or bandages**

These are usually left in place for one week in order to ensure reduction of the pressure in your veins. If you are uncomfortable or in pain let your nurse or doctor know immediately.

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Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

Further Information

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