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Leg Ulcers
Vascular Surgery
Patient Information Leaflet
What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is simply a break in the skin of the leg, which allows air and bacteria to get into the underlying tissue. This is usually caused by an injury, often a minor one that breaks the skin.

In most people such an injury will heal up without difficulty within a week or two. However, when there is an underlying problem the skin does not heal and the area of breakdown can increase in size. This is a chronic leg ulcer.

What causes leg ulcers?

The most common underlying problem causing chronic leg ulcers is disease of the veins of the leg. Venous disease is the main reason for over two thirds of all leg ulcers.

- Venous Disease (caused by veins not working) - about 80% of leg ulcers

- Arterial Disease (caused by the arteries not working) - about 15% of leg ulcers

- Other Causes (includes diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis as well as some rare conditions) - about 5% of leg ulcers

Further help and information

The Circulation Foundation
Web: www.circulationfoundation.org.uk

Access to benefits
If you require information about benefits information can be found on:- www.direct.gov.uk, www.dwp.gov.uk or your local Benefits office.
In some cases two or more conditions may be causing damage at the same time. Your doctor will examine you and do some tests to see what sort of ulcer you have. The following advice applies to venous ulcers and may not be appropriate for other sorts of ulcers.

How does venous disease cause ulcers?

The veins in your leg are tubes that carry the blood back from the foot towards your heart. The veins in your legs have one-way valves that make sure the blood flows up the leg and not back down. In some people, these valves are not very effective or can be damaged by thrombosis (clots) in the veins.

If the valves are damaged, blood can flow the wrong way down the veins, which results in a very high pressure in the veins when standing up. This abnormally high pressure in the veins damages the skin and leads to the ulcers.

How will I be treated?

Treatment of a venous leg ulcer happens in 2 ways:

- Controlling the high pressure in the leg veins
- Treatment of the ulcer

Leg ulcers are normally managed at home either by the district nurse or the leg ulcer clinic. If you are at all concerned about the ulcer becoming worse please contact the nurse looking after you.

Vascular team contact details

If you require any further information regarding our services, or any queries about your management please contact Joy Lewis Vascular nurse specialist or the consultant managing your condition via the following telephone numbers.

Mr Jayatunga - Consultant Vascular Surgeon  
Secretary - Alison Slater Tel no - 01384 244243

Mr Patel - Consultant Vascular Surgeon  
Secretary - Joanne Webb Tel no - 01384 244021

Mrs Shiralkar - Consultant Vascular Surgeon  
Secretary - Faye Langford Tel no - 01384 244246

- Keep the skin in good condition by using plenty of moisturising cream to prevent dryness

- Weight loss, fresh fruit, exercise and stopping smoking are also vital to help heal your ulcer as well as for your general health.
The mainstays of treatment are compression bandaging or stockings and elevation of the limb:

Elevation of the limb
The higher the leg, the lower the pressure in the leg veins! If the foot is elevated above the heart then the pressure in the foot drops to a normal level. Put your legs up whenever you can and as high as you are able - the arm of the sofa is good. Elevate the lower end of your bed (6 inches or so) so that when in bed your feet are a little higher than your head. You can use some old books for this.

Compression bandaging or stockings
In order to keep the pressure in the leg veins at the ankle low when you are standing up, you will be treated with compression bandaging or stockings. Several layers of bandages may be required to get the necessary pressure to control the veins. Once the ulcer is healed, compression stockings are usually necessary to prevent the ulcer from returning. These stockings need to be specially fitted and are much stronger than ordinary "support tights". If you have difficulty putting on your stockings then you can buy a special stocking applicator.

Dressings
The nurse will use a number of different dressings under the bandages depending on the state of the ulcer itself. These dressings may well change as the ulcer progresses.

Surgery
Very occasionally for the largest or very resistant ulcers either a skin graft or an operation on the veins may be necessary. If your ulcer is due to varicose veins then these may be treated, usually once the ulcer has healed.

How long will it take the ulcer to heal?
It has usually taken many years for the venous disease to cause the ulcers, so it is not surprising that the ulcers may take a fairly long time to heal. Although most venous ulcers will heal up in 3-4 months, a small proportion will take considerably longer. Don't despair! Even in these resistant cases treatment is eventually successful.

How can I stop the ulcer coming back?
Once your ulcer is healed, it does not mean that your problems are over. Although the skin is intact the underlying problem with the veins remains and you must take precautions to prevent the ulcer recurring.

- Wear compression stockings (or bandages in a few severe cases) at all times during the day
- Elevation of the legs whenever possible