

Leg ulcers

Vascular Surgery

Patient Information Leaflet

Under Review

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). Venous disease is the main reason for over two thirds of all leg ulcers.

- Venous disease (caused by veins not working) – about 80 per cent of leg ulcers
- Arterial disease (caused by the arteries not working) – about 15 per cent of leg ulcers
- Other causes (includes diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis as well as some rare conditions) – about five per cent of leg ulcers

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 two ways:

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

The main forms 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 (raised) 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 (six 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 three to four 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.
- Elevate your legs whenever possible.
- 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.

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.

Further help and information

The Circulation Foundation

Web: www.circulationfoundation.org.uk

Access to benefits

If you require information about benefits this information can be found on:

www.direct.gov.uk

www.dwp.gov.uk

or your local benefits office.

Your comments

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Freephone 0800 073 0510.

PALS is here to support patients, relatives or carers when they have concerns or queries. They will do their best to resolve any concerns you may have and can also give advice on making a formal complaint.

Under review

If you require any further information regarding our services or if you have any questions about the management of your condition, please contact your consultant or vascular nurse on the telephone numbers below.

Russells Hall Hospital, Dudley

Mr Jayatunga	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 244243
Mrs Shiralkar	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 244246
Mr Pathak	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 244245
Mr Rehman	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 244176
Mr Newman	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 244243
Mr Wall	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01384 456111 Ext 1235
Joy Lewis/Sharron Cole	Vascular nurse specialist	Tel: 01384 456111 Ext 2456 (answer machine)

New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton

Mr Garnham	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01902 695977
Mr Hobbs	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01902 695971
Paula Poulton/Val Isgar	Vascular nurse specialist	Tel: 01902 695984

Manor Hospital, Walsall

Mr Abrew	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01922 721172 Ext 7763
Mr Khan	Consultant vascular surgeon	Tel: 01922 721172 Ext 6669
Fiona Fox	Vascular nurse specialist	Tel: 01902 721172 Ext 7648

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 0730510

ਜੇਕਰ ਇਹ ਲੀਫਲੈੱਟ (ਛੋਟਾ ਇਸਤਿਹਾਰ) ਤੁਸੀਂ ਆਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ (ਪੰਜਾਬੀ) ਵਿੱਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ ਤਾਂ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਕਰ ਕੇ ਪੇਸ਼ਟ ਇੰਨਫਰਮੇਸ਼ਨ ਕੋ-ਆੱਰਡੀਨੇਟਰ ਨਾਲ **0800 0730510** ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਨੰਬਰ ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

यदि आपको यह दस्तावेज़ अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो पेशन्ट इनफरमेशन को-आरडीनेटर को टैलीफ़ोन नम्बर **0800 0730510** पर फ़ोन करें।

જો તમને આ પત્રિકા તમારી પોતાની ભાષા (ગુજરાતી)માં જોઈતી હોય, તો કૃપા કરીને પેશન્ટ ઈન્ફોર્મેશન કો-ઓર્ડીનેટરનો **0800 0730510** પર સંપર્ક કરો.

आपनि यदि এই প্রচারপত্রটি আপনার নিজের ভাষায় পেতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে পেশেন্ট ইনফরমেশন কো-অর্ডিনেটরের সাথে **0800 0730510** এই নম্বরে যোগাযোগ করুন।

إذا كنت ترغب هذه الوريقة مترجمة بلغتك الاصلية (اللغة العربية) , فرجاءا اتصل بمتسق المعلومات للمريض **0800 0730510** على التلفون Information Co-ordinator

مہم ضرورت اریلف ایٹ کوٹھا زبان (اردو) میں حاصل کرنے کے لئے روبرو ہائی ٹیلیفون نمبر **0800 0730510** پروفیسٹ انفارمیشن کو-آورڈینٹر (مریضوں کے لئے معلومات کی فراہمی کے سلسلے میں) کے ساتھ رابطہ کریں۔

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