Leg Ulcer Clinic

Gateshead Primary Care Trust
South Tyneside Primary Care Trust
Sunderland Teaching Primary Care Trust
What are the aims of this leaflet?
This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about venous leg ulcers. It will tell you what venous leg ulcers are, what causes them, what can be done about them and where you can find out more about them.

What is a leg ulcer?
A leg ulcer is an area of damaged skin below the knee on your leg or foot where an area of skin has broken down and you can see the underlying tissue, which takes longer than six weeks to heal.

Venous leg ulcers are the most common type of leg ulcer. They usually affect older people and are more common in women. About 1 in 50 people develop a venous leg ulcer at some stage. Without treatment an ulcer may become larger and cause further problems.

Other leg ulcers are less common. For example, an ulcer may be caused by poor circulation due to narrowed arteries in the leg, problems with nerves that supply the skin or other problems. The treatment for non venous ulcers is different to venous ulcers. Your Doctor or Nurse can advise you on treatments available for non venous ulcers.

The rest of this leaflet deals only with venous leg ulcers.
What causes a venous leg ulcer?

The main cause of venous leg ulcers is faulty valves inside the leg veins. These valves normally allow the blood to flow up the leg towards the heart and prevent backward flow down the leg.

If they are faulty, backward flow is not prevented and pressure builds up inside the veins. The persistent high pressure in the leg veins caused by the faulty valves damages tiny blood vessels in the skin.

The skin then becomes thin and inflamed, doesn't heal well and can easily break down to leave a sore otherwise known as a leg ulcer.

Assessment

The changes that you see in your skin will suggest to your nurse that you have a venous leg ulcer.

However it is important to check for other possible causes, especially poor blood flow to the feet. To do this, the nurse will feel for the pulses in your foot and will measure the blood pressure in your arm and leg with a small ultrasound instrument (Doppler); this will be monitored as part of your ongoing treatment.

The ulcer is cleaned when the dressing is changed - normally with ordinary tap water. A dressing will then be put over the open ulcer.
Treatment - Compression therapy

This is the most important part of the treatment. The aim is to counteract the raised pressure in the leg veins. This gives the best chance for your ulcer to heal. The dressing will be covered by a compression bandage or stocking from your toes to your knee. Up to seven in every ten venous ulcers heal within 12 weeks if treated with compression therapy, which is re-applied every week.

Important

When you have a compression bandage on you should still be able to move your ankle around. Occasionally, the compression is too tight or it may affect the circulation in the legs. Therefore take off the bandages straight away if your foot changes colour or temperature or if you have increased pain and contact your doctor or nurse for advice.

What can I do to help?

• Compression bandages or stockings work best if you exercise your leg regularly for example by walking. If you are less mobile exercise your leg muscles by moving your foot up and down at the ankle

• When you are resting, if possible try to keep your leg raised higher than your hip. This reduces the swelling in the leg and reduces the pressure of blood in the leg veins
• If you smoke, you should cut down and preferably stop. The chemicals in cigarettes may interfere with the skin healing. Ask your Doctor or Nurse if you feel you need help to stop smoking

• You should have a healthy balanced diet. If you are overweight, try to lose some weight

• Follow the instructions carefully when you wash your stockings or bandages

Other treatments

Other treatments may be needed to help heal a venous leg ulcer; other medical problems may mean that the skin has less chance of healing well.

• Antibiotics are sometimes advised for short periods if the skin and tissue around the ulcer becomes infected

• Painkillers. If the ulcer is painful

• Skin care. The skin around the ulcer is often inflamed or scaly. Your doctor or nurse will advise on ointments and creams that will reduce inflammation and keep the surrounding skin as healthy as possible

• Surgery for varicose veins or other vein problems may be advised in some cases. This may correct the 'back pressure' of blood pooling in the veins and allow an ulcer to heal
After your venous ulcer has healed

Venous ulcers commonly recur after they have healed. To help prevent this you should:-

• Wear a compression stocking

• Look after your skin - Keep it clean. After washing apply an unperfumed moisturising ointment or cream to keep your skin supple. You doctor or nurse can advise you on products to use

• Look after your feet and legs regularly. Use a mirror to help to look at your legs. If you see changes in colour or sores starting, see your doctor or nurse

• Wear comfortable shoes and socks. Avoid socks or pop socks with a tight garter or cuff. Check inside of your shoes for small stones or rough patches before you put them on

• Take care when cutting toe nails. See a Podiatrist (Chiropodist) regularly if this is needed

• Take care not to bang your feet or legs. Watch out for sharp corners and objects

Remember

You can do a lot to prevent and heal your ulcers. You are entitled to professional help and advice. If you are not sure about your treatment ask your doctor or nurse to explain.
For further information please contact the numbers below:

If you live in Gateshead:-
Carr Hill Leg Ulcer Clinic
Carr Hill Road
Gateshead
NE9 5LS
Telephone Number: 0191 490 1424
Once a month an outreach clinic is held at Dunston Health Centre, please ask a member of staff for more information.

If you live in Sunderland and South Tyneside:-
Contact your Community Nurse or Doctor

NHS South of Tyne and Wear is committed to raising the standard of written information for patients, their carers, people who use the NHS and the general public.

This information can be made available in another format or language on request. Please contact the Communications and PR Team Tel: 0191 529 7118 Email: mopil@sotw.nhs.uk