Relieving the pressure

Your guide to pressure sores

Department of Health
If you have to stay in bed or if you spend most of your time in a wheelchair or armchair, the last thing you need is a pressure sore. These painful wounds are sometimes known as ‘bedsores’, and they can take months to heal. If they become infected they can even kill.

**Carers** If you are looking after someone who has to spend time in a bed, chair or wheelchair, you should find this booklet useful. There are extra notes in boxes like this to help you.

**What is a pressure sore?**

A pressure sore is an area of damaged skin and flesh. It is usually caused by sitting or lying in one position for too long without moving.

A pressure sore can develop in only a few hours. It usually starts with the skin changing colour – it may appear slightly redder or darker than usual. If a sore isn’t treated quickly, it can develop in a few days into an open blister and – over a longer period – into a deep hole in the flesh.

Sores are most likely to develop on the parts of the body which take your weight and where the bone is close to the surface. The areas most at risk are the heels, ankles, knees, hips, bottom, base of the spine, elbows and shoulders.
Who is most likely to get a pressure sore?

You are more likely to get a pressure sore if:
- you have to stay in bed
- you are in a wheelchair
- you spend long periods in an armchair
- you have difficulty moving about
- you are elderly or weak
- you have a serious illness
- you are incontinent
- your body is not very sensitive, for example because you are diabetic or have had a stroke
- you have a bad heart or poor circulation
- you are not eating a balanced diet or having enough to drink

Are you at risk?

You don’t have to be stuck in bed to get a pressure sore

Carers
- People who cannot change position without help are at great risk.
- People who are less mentally aware (for example, because of Alzheimer’s disease or heavy sedation) are also at risk.

How can I avoid pressure sores?

Prevention is much better than cure. The best way to avoid getting a sore is to get out of your bed or chair for a short walk every hour or so. This gets the blood flowing and helps tone up the muscles. But not everyone can manage this, and there are other ways to avoid pressure sores.

If you are in bed:
- If possible, change your position at least every two hours, alternating between your back and your sides. You may need help to do this properly so that you do not drag your skin along the sheets.
- Use pillows to stop your knees and ankles touching each other, especially when you are lying on your side.
- There are various types of elbow and heel protectors – ask your doctor or nurse for advice.
- Using a simple bed cradle or duvet instead of heavy blankets can relieve pressure on your knees, ankles and heels, and make moving easier. Again, ask for advice.
• Avoid sheets made of synthetic materials like nylon because they are more likely to make your skin hot and sticky. Change your sheets often, especially if you sweat a lot.
• Take special care to avoid creases or crumbs in bed covers and sheets.
• If you sit up in bed, make sure you do not slide down because this can drag on your heels and bottom. Ask a nurse or physiotherapist for advice on the best position for sitting up.
• You might need a special bed or mattress. Your nurse or occupational therapist will tell you what is suitable and how you can get it.

Carers If you are looking after someone who cannot change position themselves, find out how to lift and move them correctly. This will help you and your patient.

If you are in an armchair or wheelchair:
• If possible, try to take the weight off your bottom every 15 minutes or so by leaning forward and pushing up on the arms of the chair. Or you could roll from cheek to cheek for a short while.
• You can get a special cushion to relieve pressure. Ask your doctor, nurse or occupational therapist if they think you need one. Everyone who has a wheelchair should contact their wheelchair centre for advice on cushions.

For everyone who is at risk:
• If you think you may be at risk, contact your GP and ask for advice.
• Try not to drag your legs and arms when you are moving or getting up because this can damage your skin. Lifting your legs and arms means that you will not rub them. And it’s better exercise.
Check your skin for signs of damage at least once a day. Look for skin that doesn’t return to its normal colour after you have taken the weight off it. For areas that are hard to see, use a mirror or ask your carer to look for you. Never lie on skin that is redder or darker than usual. Wait until it has returned to its normal colour.

**Carers** The person you are looking after may need help with this because the areas where pressure sores tend to develop are difficult to see.

- Keep your skin clean and dry.
- Avoid rubbing or massaging your skin too hard – especially over the bony parts of your body. Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- It’s better not to use skin creams unless your nurse or doctor has prescribed them.
- Don’t use talcum powder because it soaks up the natural oils in your skin and dries it out.

If you suffer from incontinence, ask your doctor or nurse for help. They may be able to cure it. If not, they will be able to give you the most suitable things to make you comfortable. Make sure you keep as clean and dry as possible.

**Carers** If you are looking after someone who is incontinent and cannot look after himself, always try to clean him as soon as he is wet or soiled.

Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty. If your skin is healthy it is less likely to be damaged.

**Carers** If you are looking after someone who cannot eat a normal diet, ask a nurse or dietitian for advice.