

Coventry & Warwickshire Vascular Unit

Chronic venous leg ulcers



What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is simply a break in the skin of the leg. The immediate cause is usually 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, if there is an underlying problem the skin does not heal and the area of breakdown may even 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 in the leg. Venous disease is the main reason for over two thirds of all leg ulcers. There are less common causes for leg ulcers such as disease of the arteries, diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis as well as a number of even rarer conditions. 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 legs are tubes that carry the blood back from the foot towards your heart. The veins contain one way valves that should allow flow up the leg but not back down the leg. However, these valves are not very effective in some people 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 ulcers.



How will I be treated?

Treatment of a venous leg ulcer is aimed firstly at controlling the high pressure in the leg veins and secondly at the ulcer itself. 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 veins. If the leg 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.
- **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, a special stocking applicator can be purchased.
- **Dressings:**
The nurse may use a number of different dressings under the bandages depending on the appearance 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 need treatment.

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.

Patient Information

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. You must take precautions to prevent the ulcer recurring.

- Stop smoking
- Walk or exercise regularly
- Wear compression stockings (or bandages in a few severe cases) at all times during the day as prescribed
- Elevate the legs during the day.
- Lose weight if overweight and eat a healthy balanced diet
- Keep the skin in good condition by using plenty of moisturising cream to prevent dryness.
- Take care not to damage the skin on your legs and feet.

If you would like to discuss the information in this booklet, please contact a Vascular Nurse Specialist: Alison Kite 024 7696 5569 and Suzanne Davies, Lauren Wells and Zoe Noakes 024 7696 6914

We hope that you have found your treatment by the Vascular Services team to your satisfaction. In order to improve our service, we welcome your **comments, compliments** and **complaints** concerning the care that you have received. This can be done by contacting the Vascular Nurses as above or PALS.

Useful Contacts

Coventry Patient advice and Liaison Service (PALS): +44 (0) 800 0284203

South Warwickshire Hospital PALS : +44 (0)1926 600054

George Eliot Hospital PALS : +44 (0) 24 7686 5617

Patient Information

Vascular Conditions

www.vascularsociety.org.uk

www.circulationfoundation.org.uk

Coventry & Warwickshire County Vascular Unit in conjunction with The Vascular Society of Great Britain and Ireland

www.vascularsociety.org.uk

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