

## Coventry & Warwickshire Vascular Unit



# Chronic venous leg ulcers

## What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is a break in the skin of the leg.

The cause is usually an injury, often a minor one that breaks your skin. In most people, this injury will heal up without difficulty within a week or two.

But 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 more than 2 in 3 of all leg ulcers.

There are less common causes for leg ulcers such as disease of the arteries, diabetes, 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 is for people with venous ulcers and may not be appropriate for other sorts of ulcers.



## **How does venous disease cause ulcers?**

The veins in your legs carry blood back from your foot towards your heart. The veins contain valves that should allow flow up the leg, but not back down the leg.

These valves are not very effective in some people or can be damaged by clots (thrombosis) in the veins. If the valves are damaged, blood can flow the wrong way down the veins. This results in a very high pressure in the veins when standing up.

This high pressure in the veins damages the skin and leads to ulcers.

## **How will I be treated?**

Treating a venous leg ulcer involves:

- firstly, controlling the high pressure in the leg veins
- secondly, controlling the ulcer itself

The main treatments are compression bandaging or stockings and elevation of the limb.

### **Elevation of the limb**

The higher your leg, the lower the pressure in your veins. If your leg is elevated above your heart, the pressure in your foot will drop to its usual level.

Put your legs up whenever you can and as high as you are able to, such as on the arm of a sofa.

### **Compression bandaging or stockings**

To keep the pressure in your 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 needed to get the pressure required to control the veins.

## Patient Information

Once the ulcer is healed, compression stockings are usually needed 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 different dressings under the bandages. This depends on the appearance of the ulcer itself. These dressings may change as the ulcer progresses.

## Surgery

Very occasionally, for the largest or very resistant ulcers, a skin graft or an operation on the veins may be necessary.

If your ulcer is due to varicose veins, 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 the ulcers may take a fairly long time to heal.

Although most venous ulcers will heal up in 3 to 4 months, a small number will take considerably longer. Don't worry. 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.

You must take precautions to prevent the ulcer recurring.

- Stop smoking
- Walk or exercise regularly

## Patient Information

- Wear the compression stockings (or bandages in a few severe cases) at all times during the day as prescribed
- Elevate your legs during the day
- Lose weight if overweight and eat a healthy balanced diet
- Keep your 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 on 024 7696 5569 or 024 7696 6914.

We hope that you have found your treatment by the Vascular Services team to your satisfaction. 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.

## Vascular conditions

[www.vascularsociety.org.uk](http://www.vascularsociety.org.uk)

[www.circulationfoundation.org.uk](http://www.circulationfoundation.org.uk)

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

[www.vascularsociety.org.uk](http://www.vascularsociety.org.uk)

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please contact us on 024 7696 5569 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

## Patient Information

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