

Preventing Pressure Ulcers

What are Pressure Ulcers and where do they occur?

A pressure ulcer, also called a bed sore or decubitus ulcer, forms where your bones are close to your skin. They can form anywhere, but most likely occur on the ankles, back, elbows, heels, tailbone and hips. They generally occur where there is pressure over a period of time such as being bedridden, using a wheelchair or being unable to change your body's position.

Who's at risk?

- People who have trouble moving or changing positions.
- People who cannot feel pain over part or all of their bodies such as diabetic or stroke patients.
- People who do not or cannot keep their skin free from urine, stool, or sweat.
- Those who are seriously ill or have had surgery.
- Those who cannot or do not eat a balanced diet.
- People who are not mentally aware.
- Older individuals who have suffered an injury like a broken hip or leg.
- Those with a history of past pressure ulcers have a higher risk as the skin is weak in that area.
- People with poor blood flow or swelling in their legs.

What to look for

- Cracked, blistered, scaly, or broken skin.
- An open sore on the skin's surface or in the tissue under the skin.
- Yellowish stains on clothing, sheets, or chairs (may be tinged with blood).
- Painful or tender "pressure points" (such as on the back of the head, ears, back of shoulders, elbows, buttocks, hips, heels, or any place a bony part rests on the bed surface).
- Red pressure points on the skin that don't go away.

Prevention is possible!

- Eat a balanced diet, with foods high in protein.
- Keep skin clean and dry.
- Moisturize dry skin.
- Stay hydrated with lots of fluids.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Get active.

- Turn and reposition at least every two hours while in bed. If in a chair, try to change position every 15-30 minutes.
- Make sure bedding is wrinkle-free and there are no objects, such as crumbs, in bed.
- Avoid sitting/laying on a bony area such as a hip or tailbone, for prolonged periods of time.
- Keep heels off the mattress using special boots or by placing a pillow under legs.
- Perform exercises while in bed, on a chair or wheelchair to maintain circulation and muscle tone.
- Check skin often – especially where ulcers form most often – heels, hips, tailbone.
- Avoid having the head of the bed raised more than 30 degrees, whenever possible. Rest with the head as low as possible.
- Avoid rubbing or massaging reddened skin.
- Use pillows to protect the body's most bony parts.

If you have any questions or problems, speak with your healthcare provider.

Resources:

National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel: www.npuap.org, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality: www.ahrq.gov, Medline Plus: www.medlineplus.gov

