

Preventing pressure ulcers

A guide for adults at risk of pressure ulcers

Relieving the pressure

If you spend most of your time in an armchair, wheelchair or in bed, the last thing you need is a pressure ulcer.

These wounds are sometimes known as pressure sores or bedsores.

It is better to prevent them as they can take a long time to heal. If they are left untreated complications may occur which could be fatal.

This guide lets you know what you and your carer can do to help prevent developing a pressure ulcer.

Carers:

If you are looking after someone who has to spend time in an armchair, wheelchair or bed, you should find this guide useful. There are extra notes in boxes like this to help you.

What is a pressure ulcer?

A pressure ulcer is an area of damaged skin and flesh. It is usually caused by sitting or lying in one position for too long without moving, or by rubbing or dragging your skin across a surface.

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

Pressure ulcers 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 spine, elbows and shoulders.

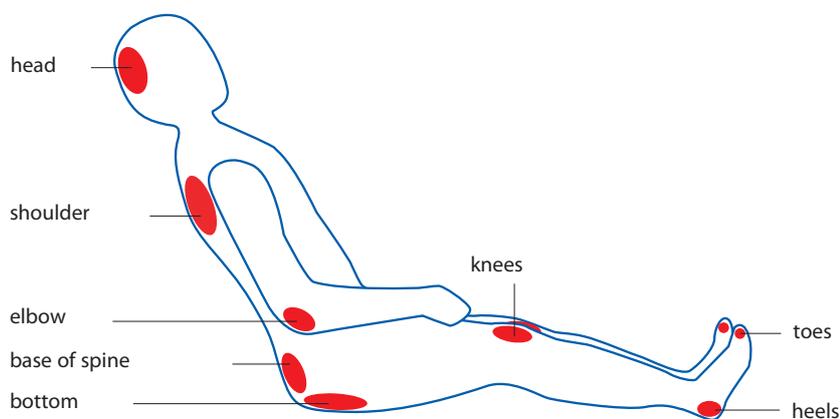


Figure 1

Carers:

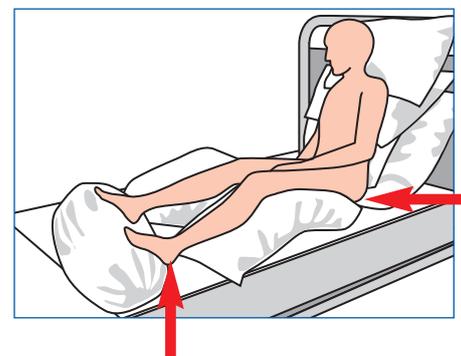
If you are looking after someone who cannot change position themselves, seek advice from a health professional to find out how to lift and move them correctly.

Figure 1

The shaded areas indicate vulnerable areas of the body with regards to pressure ulcers.

If you are in an armchair or wheelchair:

- If possible, try to take the weight off any vulnerable areas 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 a health professional if you need one. Everyone who has a wheelchair should contact their wheelchair centre for advice on cushions.



The red arrows indicate areas of relieved pressure

Figure 2

If you are in bed:

- If possible change your position 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 pressure redistribution equipment. Ask a health professional for advice.
- Using a bed cradle or light weight duvet instead of heavy blankets can relieve pressure on vulnerable

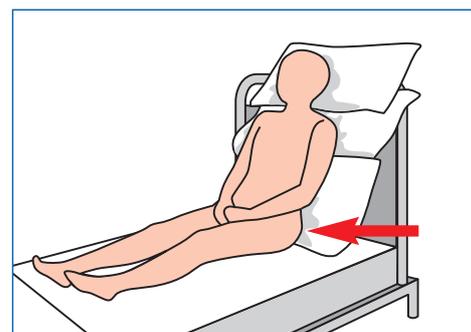


Figure3

areas and will make moving easier.

- Avoid sheets made of synthetic material like nylon because they are more likely to make your skin hot and sticky. Sheets should be changed 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, try not to slide down because this can drag on your skin.
- You might need some specialist equipment and a health professional will tell you what is suitable and how you can get it.

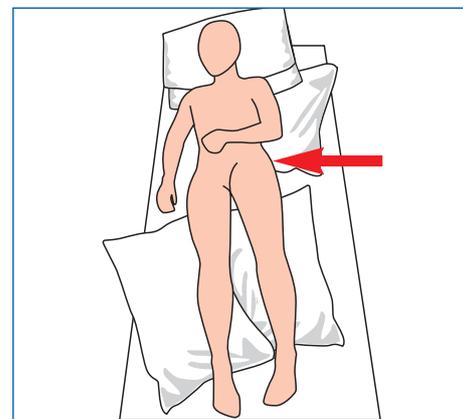


Figure4

The red arrow indicates area of relieved pressure

What should I do if I think I may be at risk of developing a pressure ulcer?

- Contact a health professional 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.
- Avoid tight clothing and ensure that seams do not cause friction.

Skin inspection

- Check your skin for signs of damage at least once a day. Look for skin that does not 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, warmer or darker than usual.
- Keep your skin clean and moisturised.
- Avoid rubbing or massaging your skin too hard – especially over the bony parts of your body. Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Do not use talcum powder or perfumed soaps because it may dry out your skin. Talcum powder may make it difficult to see if the skin is redder or darker than usual.
- Ask advice from a healthcare professional on the use of skin creams.

Incontinence

- If you experience incontinence, ask your health professional for advice. They may be able to help you manage it. If not, they will be able to give you the most suitable products to make you comfortable.

Nutrition

- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water. If your skin is healthy it is less likely to be damaged. Recommended intake of fluid is 2 litres per day.

Carers:

The person you are looking after may need help with inspecting their skin because the areas where pressure ulcers tend to develop are difficult to see and may require more frequent checks.

Carers:

If you are looking after someone who is incontinent and cannot look after themselves, always try to clean them as soon as they are wet or soiled.

Carers:

If you are looking after someone who cannot eat a normal diet, ask a health professional for advice.

What should I do if I think I may have a pressure ulcer?

Get professional advice quickly

Talk to a health professional. Pressure ulcers are more likely to get better with treatment. Always ask for help if you think you need it.

Eat a healthy diet

It is very important to try and eat regularly and maintain a balanced diet that includes plenty of fluids.

Use the right equipment

You can get a wide range of support equipment, including specialist mattresses, bed frames and cushions. A health professional will tell you what you need and how best to access it.

Try not to worry

Pressure ulcers will sometimes happen even if you are doing everything you can to avoid them. **So do not blame yourself.**

For further information please contact your local health professional through your GP surgery, for example nurse, dietitian, physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

You can download this document from www.tissueviabilityonline.com

On request this guide can be provided in the following formats from www.nhshealthquality.org

- by email
- in large print
- on audio tape or CD
- in Braille (English only), and
- in community languages.

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