



LEG ULCERS

Patient information factsheet

What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is a wound on the leg which takes more than two weeks to heal. You might know what happened when you got your ulcer, but there are always other health reasons why the ulcer is slow to heal.

Why are leg ulcers slow to heal?

Your ulcer is likely to be caused by a problem with the veins or arteries (tubes that carry blood to/from your heart) in your leg. There are some rarer causes of ulcers, but your nurse will identify the correct reason why your ulcer has appeared.

What is a 'venous leg ulcer'?

A venous leg ulcer is caused by poor blood circulation (movement of blood) in the veins of your leg. This may occur if the calf muscle or valves in the vein are not working properly. Normally, the calf muscle helps to squeeze the deep vein that forces the valves to open and blood to flow upwards towards the heart. When the calf muscles are not squeezing, the valves close to prevent the blood from flowing backwards.

If these valves do not close properly, some of the blood will flow backwards to cause varicose veins (veins that look like they are bulging and blue, under the skin), skin swelling and/or an ulcer. If you have problems with the veins in your legs, you might notice these signs and symptoms.

What is an 'arterial ulcer'?

An arterial ulcer is caused by a blockage or partial blockage in one of the arteries of your leg. Due to the blockage, the affected area of the skin does not get the nutrients and oxygen it needs resulting in the formation of an ulcer. You may also find that you feel cramping pains in your calves when you walk or put your legs up.

What is a 'mixed ulcer'?

A mixed ulcer is caused by a blockage or partial blockage in an artery, and the valves in your veins not closing properly.

How will the nurse decide what treatment I need?

Your nurse will complete an assessment of your legs and ulcer(s). They will ask you questions about when your ulcer appeared, take your medical history, and talk to you about what might affect the ulcer healing. Then they will look at your legs and ulcer(s) for any signs and symptoms that can help identify the correct reason why your ulcer has appeared. Finally, your nurse will undertake a 'Doppler' test (a test of the blood flow), this involves listening to the pulses in your feet and comparing the blood pressure in your leg and in your arms. This whole process can take up to two hours.



How will my leg be treated?

Once your nurse has assessed your leg and ulcer(s) they will discuss your treatment with you. The treatment involves bandaging your legs (starting next to your toes and finishing just below your knee) or using compression garments. The type of bandaging or garment you are given will depend on whether you have any problems with the arteries in your leg. People with veinous or mixed ulcers are normally treated with compression garments or bandages. Using compression garments or bandages will help the damaged veins to work better, but it does not repair the damaged veins. If you agree, your nurse will also arrange for a referral to a specialist to see if other treatments could be helpful.

What should I look out for during my treatment?

During your treatment you should look out for the following symptoms:

- increased pain
- increased or new numbness or feelings of pins and needles
- loss of colour to the toes

If you notice any of these symptoms, you should take the compression bandage or compression garment off. If you cannot do that for yourself, you should contact your nurse and arrange for them to do it for you.

What else can I do to help my leg heal?

It is important that you eat a healthy balanced diet that is also rich in protein so that you get all the nutrients that your body needs to heal the ulcers. If you have a veinous or a mixed ulcer you should also do the following:

- Sleep in a bed
- Raise your leg above your hips.
- Walking outdoors or around your home makes the muscles in your leg pump blood to your heart, which improves your blood flow.
- Ankle exercises, which help the muscles in your leg pump blood towards your heart.

What happens after my leg heals?

You should contact your doctor or practice nurse if an ulcer returns, or if you have any problems with your legs. If compression bandaging or garments have been used to heal your ulcer, you must continue to do so for the rest of your life, unless your clinician tells you to stop. If you are using compression bandaging or garments, you should have a 'Doppler test' and your legs remeasured every 6-12 months.



Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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Date published: 22/02/2024
Review date: 22/02/2026
Ref: ACS/TisViab/LUs/01

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