

PRESSURE ULCERS: PREVENTION AND SKIN CARE



Pressure ulcers (also called bedsores, pressure sores, or decubitus ulcers) are skin wounds that are caused by poor blood circulation when a person must sit in a chair or stay in bed for a prolonged period. They usually develop over a bony part of the body. In this video the pressure ulcer is on the person's heel. Other common sites for pressure ulcers are the tailbone (the base of the spine), shoulder blades, hip bones, and the back of the head.

Supplies for Treating a Pressure Ulcer

To treat a pressure ulcer, or to be prepared in case one happens, these are supplies to have on hand:

- > Saline spray to clean the wound
- > Dressing to cover the wound
 - Silicone dressing is easier to remove because it doesn't stick to the skin
- > Tape or gauze wrap to keep the dressing in place
- > Disposable gloves
- > Towel to support the person's body part and keep the surface clean
- > Zip-lock plastic bags for disposal of treatment materials
 - Don't put used materials directly in the garbage
- > Air-mattress or off-loading boot (if recommended by health care professional)

Costs

Air-filled pillows or mattress and an off-loading boot that takes the pressure off the sore if it's on a heel may be useful. These are called "durable medical equipment" (DME). DME is covered by Medicare, Medicaid, and most insurance plans if a physician certifies that the equipment is "medically necessary." There may be deductibles and copays and you may have to use a specific vendor. If you purchase this type of equipment online, be sure to ask your health care provider exactly what is needed because there are many varieties to choose from.

Steps in Treating a Pressure Ulcer

1. Wash your hands thoroughly
2. Put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves
3. If there is an old dressing, remove it carefully
4. Place it in the resealable plastic bag for disposal
5. Cleanse the wound with mild soap and water or saline spray and pat dry
6. Remove your gloves and place in the disposal bag
7. Wash your hands again
8. Put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves
9. Put recommended product on the wound to keep it moist
10. Apply a clean dressing as prescribed
11. Use tape or gauze wrap to keep the dressing in place
12. Remove your gloves and place in the disposal bag
13. Make sure all materials are in the disposal bag
14. Wash hands again

Signs of Infection

When changing the dressing, make sure you look for any signs of infection. These include:

- > Redness
- > Swelling
- > Change in drainage
- > Fever
- > Chills
- > Increased pain

If any of these occurs, and especially if you observe more than one, contact your health care professional immediately.

Preventing Pressure Ulcers

- > Pressure ulcers are common, yet there are many ways to prevent or at least reduce the most serious occurrences.
- > Changing position in bed or chair is the best way to take pressure off the affected part of the body. Standard advice (as shown in the video) is to change position in bed every two hours. For some caregivers this may be difficult to carry out, especially if it involves lifting a mattress or the person is heavy and/or immobile. It is important to reposition the person as often as possible.
- > Even with an air-filled mattress, using pillows as wedges to protect vulnerable parts of the body is helpful.
- > Clothing should be loose but not so loose that it bunches under the person in bed.
- > Drinking lots of water is important to keep the skin from drying out
- > The person's diet should include nutritious foods such as:
 - Foods rich in protein – lean turkey or chicken
 - Vegetables
 - Whole grains
- > Be alert to early signs of skin breakdown, such as discolored, cracked, blistered, or broken skin.

Other Resources

- > “[Pressure Sores](#)” from familydoctor.org, a website of the American Academy of Family Physicians, provides background in English and Spanish on pressure ulcers, including the different stages of this type of wound and questions to ask the doctor. Trigger warning: The photos on the website show wounds that are more advanced than the one in the video.
- > The American Cancer Society provides information in English and Spanish on [pressure sores](#), a common complication in cancer treatment. Although intended for cancer care, it is applicable to other vulnerable people as well.
- > The United Hospital Fund's Next Step in Care website has a family caregiver's guide to [Durable Medical Equipment](#). It is available in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian.
- > For veterans and caregivers of veterans, go to www.caregiver.va.gov or call 1-855-260-3274 for more information about resources and support.

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