Venous Leg Ulcers and Compression Bandaging Therapy

A guide for patients

What is a leg ulcer?

- A leg ulcer is a split in the skin.
- It is sometimes caused by a knock or scratch to the leg.
- In most people it will heal by itself in 1 to 2 weeks.
- A leg ulcer may not heal so easily for some people who have health problems.
What causes a leg ulcer?

There are many types of ulcer. You have a **venous** ulcer.

**Venous** – blood flows around the body through veins and arteries. Another name for a vein is venous.

- There are lots of veins in your leg to move the blood around.

- There are valves inside the veins to stop the blood from flowing backwards.

- If the valves in your vein become damaged, the blood pressure in your legs will increase.

- Damaged valves will make the veins stretch and swell up.

What are the symptoms of a leg ulcer?

- Leg ulcers are common on the skin just above the ankle.

- The skin may be swollen and feel tender to touch.

- The skin may be dry and itchy.

- The skin may become darker in colour and become red/brown.
How is a leg ulcer diagnosed?

- A nurse specialist will do an examination and check your leg.
- They will look at where the ulcer is and how it looks.

- The nurse specialist will check the blood pressure inside your veins.
- She will check the pulse in your feet using a special machine.
- The machine is called a doppler.

- The nurse specialist will check the blood pressure in your arms too and check if it is the same as your legs.

- The doctor or nurse specialist will use the information to decide the best treatment for you.
How will I be treated?

The treatment will try to lower the blood pressure in the veins in your leg and the ulcer. The are 4 ways this can be done.

1. **Raising the legs**
   - Lifting the legs up higher than you waist level helps to lower the blood pressure in the leg veins.
   - You can do this by sitting or lying down with your feet raised up resting on a pillow.
   - It is important to raise your legs as often as possible during the day.
   - At bedtime, you can rest your feet on a pillow so they are higher than your head.

2. **Compression Bandaging or Stockings**

   **Compression** – applying pressure and wrapping firmly.

   - The blood pressure in your leg can be helped by having layers of bandages wrapped around. It is normal to have about 4 layers of bandages.

   - When the ulcer has healed, the bandages are removed. You will then wear a compression stocking to help stop the ulcer coming back.

   - The stockings are stronger than normal support tights.

   - You will be given a prescription to get the compression stockings.
How will I be treated? (continued)

3. Dressings
- There are different types of dressings that can be placed over the ulcer and under a bandage.
- The nurse specialist will decide which dressing is best for your ulcer.

4. Surgery
- Very rarely, some people need to have a skin graft to close up the ulcer.

Skin graft – this is when a good piece of skin is cut from your body and stitched onto a place where the skin is damaged.

- If your ulcer is caused by varicose veins, you may be referred to a surgeon to see if the varicose veins need to be removed.

Varicose veins – these are veins that have become large and misshapen. Inside the veins are valves that stop the blood from flowing backwards down the leg. If the valves stop working properly, blood can pool inside the vein making it large and lumpy.
How long will a leg ulcer take to heal?

- It can take a long time for an ulcer to heal.
- For some people it takes 3 to 4 months, but it might take longer.
- You should follow the advice given to you by the doctor and nurse specialist to help your ulcer to heal.
- If your ulcer gets infected, you will be given antibiotic medicine from the doctor to help it get better.

How do I keep the bandages and stocking dry?

- It is important to try and keep the bandages dry.
- You will have the bandages on your leg for 1 week.
- This will help the ulcer to heal faster.
- When you have a bath or shower you need to cover the bandages and stocking to keep them dry.
- You can wear a plastic cover called a limbo cover over your bandaged leg.
- You will get a limbo cover on prescription from the doctor.
How can I help myself?

1. **Do not smoke.**
   - Smoking makes it difficult for the blood to flow around your body.
   - This means your ulcer could take longer to heal.

2. **Do regular exercise**
   - Walk around often.
   - Using your foot and leg muscles helps to push the blood around your legs.
   - This helps your ulcer to heal more quickly.

3. **Do not stand or sit in one position for too long.**
   - Try and change position every 30 minutes.

4. **Eat healthy foods**
   - For example
     - meat, oily fish, milk, eggs and cheese.
     - fruit and vegetables
   - Do not have too many fatty or salty foods.

5. **Raise your legs**
   - Try to sit with your legs lifted up so that your feet are higher than your waist.
   - Do not cross your legs when you are sitting down
How can I help myself? (continued)

6. **Wear compression stockings**
   - Keep the stockings on until your doctor or nurse tells you to stop wearing them.

7. **Protect your skin**
   - Do not let your skin get too warm.
   - Do not have the water too hot in your bath or shower.
   - Do not sit too close to the fire.
   - Use moisturiser on your legs. The nurse will tell you which one is best to use.

8. **Weight**
   - Lose some weight if you are overweight. This will help your ulcer to heal.
   - Being the right weight can help to stop you getting another ulcer.

9. **Medicine**
   - Your ulcer will be painful so the doctor or nurse will give you medicine called painkillers.
   - Take the painkillers as you have been told by the doctor or nurse.
Who can I call for help?

Hospital Nurse Specialist

- If you are worried, you can call the Nurse Specialist.
- The Nurse Specialist is called ______________________

- You need to leave a message on the telephone answer machine.
- The Nurse Specialist will call you back.
- The telephone number is 0191 445 2828.

Monday to Thursday

Helen works in the hospital on the following days and times

Monday to Thursday from 8.30 in the morning to 4.30 in the afternoon.

and

Friday from 8.30 in the morning to 2.00 in the afternoon.

NHS Service

- You can contact NHS Direct on telephone number 111.

Your GP

- You can telephone your own GP for advice and help.
Where did we find information to help to write this leaflet?

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