

Taking the Pressure Off: Preventing & Managing Pressure Injuries

Pressure injuries (also known as pressure ulcers) are caused by intense and long-lasting pressure that damages the skin, and the tissue under the skin. They can develop in a very short time and take a long time to heal. Pressure injuries can negatively impact a person's relationships, physical and mental health, and ability to perform day-to-day activities. In most cases, pressure injuries can be prevented. And when they do occur, they can be healed.

What causes pressure injuries?

- Not being able to move well independently (e.g. short-term or long-term illness, after surgery).
- Not being able to control one's bowel and/or bladder, causing skin to become moist and soiled.
- Not having a well-balanced diet.

What should I know about pressure injuries?

- The first sign of a pressure injury is reddened skin for people with lighter complexions, or a purple/blue for people with darker skin tones. It may or may not be painful.
- A very sick person may develop a pressure injury quickly.
- People who lie in bed for extended periods may develop pressure injuries on bony areas where they rest their weight, such as the tailbone, buttocks, heels, hips, ankles, shoulder blades, back of the head, ears, elbows and knees.
- For people who sit in a chair or wheelchair, a pressure injury may develop on the buttocks. They may also develop because of long-term pressure on the person's skin from medical devices.

What happens when I develop a pressure injury?

Healing occurs best when a team of health-care experts works together to help you. It depends on:

- Your overall health
- Consuming balanced meals/drinks
- Reducing pressure on the injury
- Cleaning and treating the wound

What can I do if I have a pressure injury?

- If in bed for a long time, reposition your body every two-to-four hours, if possible.
- While sitting, shift your weight every 15 minutes, if possible.
- Work with a dietitian to determine what is best to eat and drink to help pressure injuries heal.
- Work with the health-care team to keep the pressure injury clean and moist, and treat any infection.
- Other treatments may be considered for pressure injuries that are slow to heal. They include: electrical stimulation, ultrasound and ultraviolet light. Ask a member of the health care team if one of these treatments will work for you.

What can I do if I am in bed for a long time?

- Change your position often by turning your body at least every two to four hours. If you cannot move on your own, have someone help you.
- Try not to lie down on your hip. Instead, turn to your side and support yourself with pillows.
- Use pillows or special cushions (e.g. foam wedges) so that bony areas do not touch each other.
- Elevate your heels so that they do not touch the surface of the bed. You can also use heel protectors to reduce pressure on your heels and ankles.

What can I do if I am in a chair or wheelchair for a long time?

- Shift your weight every 15 minutes. If you cannot, have someone reposition you at least every hour.
- Do not create your own cushion (e.g., donut) as it will likely just move pressure to a new area of your body. Instead, use special cushions called ‘pressure-reducing devices.’
- An occupational therapist or a physical therapist can suggest the best seating device or special cushion based on your needs.

What can I do as a caregiver?

- Use lifting devices to help transfer the person to a bed or chair or when changing their position. Keep the skin and bony areas of the body from rubbing on surfaces.
- Talk to a nurse, occupational therapist, physical therapist or doctor about proper transfer techniques, and how to obtain lifting and pressure-reducing devices. *(Caution: The use of pressure-reducing devices does not replace an appropriate schedule for regularly turning someone)*
- Discuss ways to manage the person’s pressure injury-related pain with the health-care team.

What can I do to prevent pressure injuries?

- Use products that are gentle on the skin and pH-balanced when bathing and after instances of incontinence.
- Use products that keeps the skin moist and protects it.
- Do not massage bony areas of the body.
- Consume healthy, balanced meals, snacks and drinks. Eat fruits, vegetables and foods high in protein and energy. Drink plenty of water and other fluids. If you cannot eat a balanced diet or if you have diabetes, ask the health-care team about supplements.

How can I get in touch with wound care experts in my community?

- Visit www.cawc.net and under “patient resources” you will find a list of clinics in Canada.
- Contact your local health authority/LHIN to find wound care resources in your area.
- Visit www.caet.ca to find a nurse in your area who specializes in wound care.

This information fact sheet is developed as a supplement to the RNAO Nursing Best Practice Guidelines *Risk Assessment and Prevention of Pressure Ulcers (2011)* and *Assessment and Management of Pressure Injuries for the Interprofessional Team, Third Edition (2016)*. It is intended to increase your knowledge and involvement in making decisions about your health. These nursing best practice guidelines are available for public viewing and free download at RNAO.ca/bestpractices.