

Advice to patients about

VENOUS LEG ULCERS

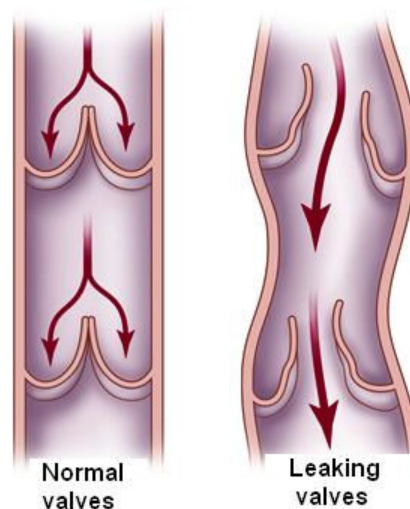
What is a leg ulcer?

A leg ulcer is a wound on the lower part of the leg that takes longer than six weeks to heal. The usual cause is a minor injury that breaks the skin. In most people such an injury will heal up without difficulty within a week or two. However, if there is an underlying circulation problem then the skin may not heal. Leg ulcers can develop quickly and if untreated may last for years. It is important that they are properly diagnosed so that the correct treatment can be given.

What causes leg ulcers?

Leg ulcers are usually due to a problem with your veins (venous) or arteries (arterial). There are less common causes for leg ulcers such as diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis.

Veins are the blood vessels that carry blood back to the heart. When your leg muscles move they help squeeze blood back to the heart and the valves in the veins stop the blood from flowing backwards. If these valves leak, blood flows back down the legs and pressure builds up at the ankle. This high pressure causes inflammation of the skin (cellulitis) and causes swelling due to leakage of fluid (pitting oedema). If untreated, this damage can result in the development of a venous ulcer. The leaky valves may be familial (run in the family) or may be due to damage from a previous DVT (deep vein thrombosis). Poor mobility can also cause the same problem if the blood is not pumped out of the leg by the muscles.



How will your ulcer be treated?

The majority of venous ulcers are treated by compression therapy which improves the blood flow out of the leg. This usually requires several layers of bandages around your lower leg and foot. These are changed by your nurse on a weekly or twice-weekly basis. If the ulcer is small enough it may be managed by a compression stocking over a dressing. You can safely bathe or shower with your ulcer exposed prior to having your legs redressed. This also helps to remove any dry skin.

You should rest with your legs elevated whenever possible. Try to exercise regularly. If you are unable to walk try moving your feet up and down whilst sitting or lying. Avoid long-distance travel until your ulcer has healed.

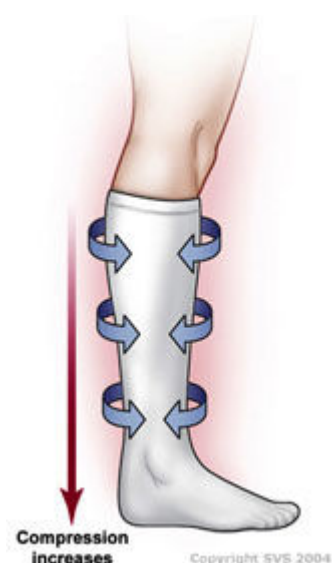
How long will it take for my ulcer to heal?

It has usually taken many years for the venous disease to cause the ulcers, so it is not surprising that the ulcers may take a long time to heal. Although many venous ulcers will heal in 3-4 months a small proportion can take considerably longer. Ulcers which have been present for months or years are slower to heal and a stage may be reached where healing is difficult without a period of bed rest in hospital. Skin grafting is occasionally also required. If your ulcer is due to varicose veins, then these may be treated when your ulcer has healed to reduce the risk of further ulceration.

How can I stop the ulcer from coming back?

Compression Stockings

Once the ulcer has healed, compression stockings are necessary to prevent the ulcer from returning. They are obtainable on prescription initially from the hospital and then from your own GP. You should put on the stocking before you get out of bed and only remove it before going to bed. If you are unable to re-apply the stockings daily they can be left in place overnight and changed every few days or even weekly by a relative or nursing staff. You may also find it useful to buy an applicator specially designed to help you apply the stockings. You will need a new supply of stockings every 4 – 6 months. Below knee stockings are usually sufficient except when the venous damage is very extensive. Compression stockings are available in 3 strengths: Class 1, 2 and 3. Class 2 is usually sufficient to control the swelling. Open toe stockings can be worn under socks or tights. Closed toe stockings can be worn by themselves like pop-socks, and are cooler in hot weather. There are many different makes of compression stocking – if one kind doesn't suit you, try another.



Other things that help

There are other things which you can do to reduce the risk of the ulcer returning:

- Eat a healthy balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Try to lose weight if you are overweight as increased weight puts more strain on the veins.
- Exercise regularly as this assists the calf muscle to pump blood up the veins. If you are unable to walk, try moving your feet up and down while you are sitting or lying. Consider an exercise bike or aquarobics at your local swimming pool.
- When sitting, elevate your leg on another chair or on the end of the sofa.
- Stop smoking as this reduces the amount of oxygen to your legs
- Wear correctly fitting shoes with a low heel, and elevate you legs whenever possible.
- Wash and cream your legs regularly to avoid dry skin which is more easily damaged.
- Seek immediate medical or nursing advice if you damage your skin. Never try to heal the wound yourself.

What is the Sheffield Vascular Institute?

The Sheffield Vascular Institute is one of the largest vascular centres in Europe. We specialise in the treatment of all circulatory conditions affecting the arteries, veins and lymphatic's. If you wish to find out more about the Sheffield Vascular Institute then look under the Guide to Services of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust website (<http://www.sth.nhs.uk>)