



How to prevent pressure ulcers

Information for wheelchair users

What are pressure ulcers?

Pressure ulcers are areas of damage to the skin and the underlying tissues. They used to be known as pressure sores / bed sores.

They are usually caused by:

- Pressure being placed on the same area of skin for a long period of time, such as staying in your wheelchair or in one position for too long. Normal body weight can squash the skin and reduce the blood supply to the area
- Shearing of the skin when the layers of the skin are forced to slide over one another in opposite directions, such as sliding down in your wheelchair or being pulled up in your wheelchair. You will not necessarily see this type of damage as it happens beneath the skin
- Friction or unsafe movements which drag the skin, such as poor transfer techniques or when an area of skin is frequently rubbed

Are they serious?

For some people they can be painful, or an inconvenience that require nursing care. For others, pressure ulcers can lead to life threatening complications such as infections in the blood.

Who is at risk of developing pressure ulcers?

Some people are more likely to develop a pressure ulcer than others.

Those most at risk of developing pressure ulcers are people with reduced mobility.

The chance of you developing a pressure ulcer increases when you are in a wheelchair.

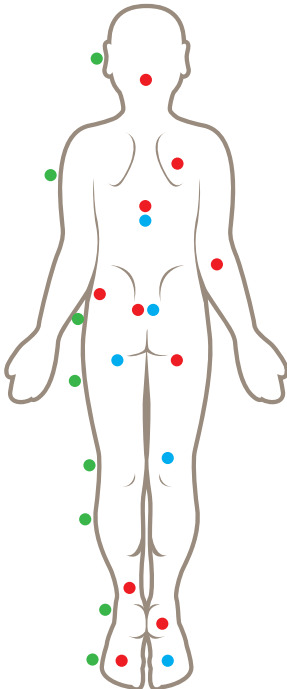
You might be at risk if you:

- have problems moving or changing position without help
- cannot feel pain over part or all of your body

- have problems controlling your bladder
- are seriously ill
- have had a pressure ulcer before
- have a poor diet and don't drink enough water (seek the advice of a healthcare professional)
- have problems with memory and understanding
- have an injury which affects how you move

There are lots of other reasons you might be at risk. If you are at risk of developing a pressure ulcer your healthcare professional will explain the reasons.

Common places for pressure ulcers



Pressure ulcer sites

- Laying on your back
- When seated
- Laying on your side

How can you prevent a pressure ulcer developing?

There are a few simple steps that you can take to help prevent pressure ulcers.

Just remember SSKIN

Surface: Do you have the right support?

- consider all the surfaces you are in contact with
- use the correct pressure-relieving cushion, or other equipment, that you have been prescribed
- contact your healthcare professional immediately if you have any concerns about your equipment or you feel that it is not meeting your needs



Skin: Check your skin regularly.

Pressure ulcers can happen anywhere on your skin and all areas should be checked regularly. The most common places for pressure ulcers are where bones are close to the skin, such as the bottom, heel, hip, elbow, ankle, shoulder, back and the back of the head.

Use a mirror or ask a carer or healthcare professional to help you if needed.

Areas of discoloured skin where you are sitting or lying could be early signs of pressure damage. Look out for areas of skin that don't return to normal colour after you have taken the weight off.

Look out for areas of increased warmth, pain or swelling or any changes to the usual feel of the tissues over a bony prominence.

Keep Moving: Move around and change your position regularly.

- try to take the weight off your bottom every 15-30 minutes when sitting in your chair

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- if you can stand and it is safe to do so, this is best. If you can't, roll the cheeks of your bottom from side to side or lean forwards in your chair
 - ask someone to help if you have difficulty moving
 - use the right equipment for moving around
 - avoid dragging your legs or arms when you are moving as this can damage the skin

Incontinence/moisture: Moisture sitting on your skin can damage the top layers of skin increasing your risk of pressure.

This may be caused by sweat, a weeping wound or incontinence, and makes the skin much more vulnerable to damage.

Make sure you are using appropriate incontinence products. Your community nurse can help with this.

Do not use talc or cream, except creams that have been recommended by a health professional.

Nutrition/Hydration: Eat healthily and drink frequently.

If you don't eat a well-balanced diet it leaves your skin more vulnerable to pressure damage and poor recovery.

You can speak to your nurse or GP about your diet; they may refer you to a dietitian.

How to relieve pressure whilst sitting in your wheelchair

There are several ways you can relieve pressure whilst sitting in your wheelchair.

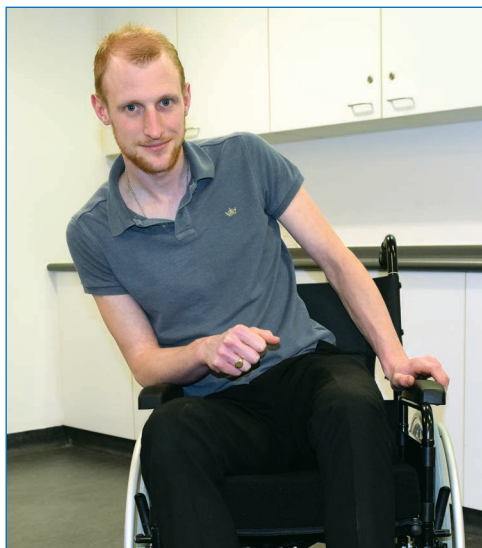
It is generally recommended that you purposely move in your wheelchair to relieve pressure every 15-30 minutes.

For all of the following movements your wheel locks need to be engaged (brakes need to be on).



Rolling

Raise one cheek of your bottom (buttock) off the seat of your wheelchair at a time, by leaning or rolling sideways in your wheelchair. This movement does not always require a high level of physical effort, but you may need to use the arm rests or a table to the side for support and to keep you stable.



Leaning forwards

With a stable chair or table in front of you, for support if needed, and your feet on the footplates, lean forwards in your wheelchair moving your chest towards your thighs. Keep your buttocks in contact with the seat as you do this. This movement can relieve pressure in the lower part of your back; however seek advice from your health care professional if this affects your bladder function.



Repositioning advice* (general)

It is important that you reposition yourself regularly. For example, move to another seat or rest on a bed. This helps reduce the risk of pressure ulcers developing. NICE Guidelines (2014) recommend that:

- **Adults** who are assessed as being **at risk** should change their position frequently and **at least** every **4-6 hours**
- **Adults** who are assessed as being at **high risk** should change their position frequently and **at least** every **4 hours**
- **Children/young people** who are assessed as being **at risk** should change their position frequently and **at least** every **4 hours**
- **Children/young people** who are assessed as being at **high risk** should change their position **more frequently** than every **4 hours**

Your health care professional can tell you which risk category you are in.

*NICE (2014) Pressure ulcers: prevention and management of pressure ulcers, clinical guideline 179, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, London [guidance.nice.org.uk/cg179](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG179)



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