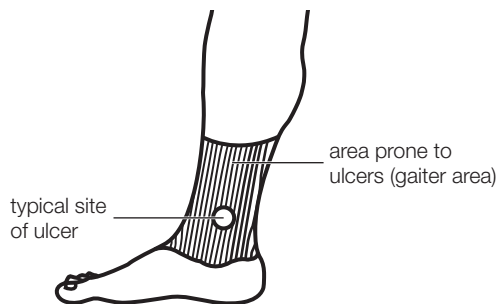


Leg ulcers

What are leg ulcers?

Leg ulcers are abnormal 'holes' that occur in breaks in the skin in the lower leg. Ulcers can occur in any person, but the elderly who have poor circulation are most likely to develop ulcers. They usually occur in the area known as the *gaiter* area of the leg. Twice as many women as men are affected.



What is the cause?

Ulcers are usually caused by a combination of two problems: rather sluggish circulation to the leg and poor drainage due to varicose veins. The further the distance is from the pump (the heart), the more likely the area is to be affected by poor circulation, so that the ankle area is the most vulnerable. The skin becomes thin, and because injuries such as those from knocks or scratches are common here the skin tends to break down and heal poorly. The small crack in the skin may enlarge and gradually become an ulcer.

What are the symptoms?

The ulcer has dead tissue in it and usually weeps. The most common site is the skin on the inside of the leg just above the ankle. The skin around the ulcer usually becomes red, itchy, flaky and discoloured. Many are not painful, just uncomfortable, but those due to very poor circulation can be quite painful, especially if on the foot.

What are the problems?

Slow healing is the main problem. This is usually not a serious problem, but an ulcer can take months or years to heal in an older person. Ulcers in younger persons usually heal in a few weeks. Those with diabetes or peripheral vascular disease (clogged arteries) heal slowly. Rarely the ulcer is due to an infection or can develop skin cancer and therefore needs careful medical attention.

What is the treatment?

Self-help

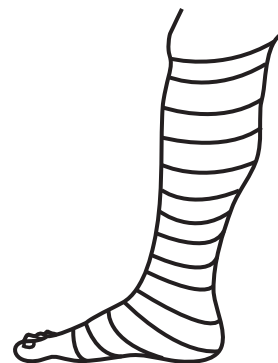
The key to healing is to keep the leg elevated as much as possible and also to keep fluid out of the leg, which is helped by a firm bandage. Raising the legs above the level of the heart reduces swelling and quickens healing.

Avoid standing for long periods, but undertake moderate walking exercise. Avoid smoking and have a nutritious diet. Be extremely careful not to injure the leg, as the skin of the legs is fragile. Do not scratch, watch out for sharp stakes in the garden and be careful of hot-water bottles.

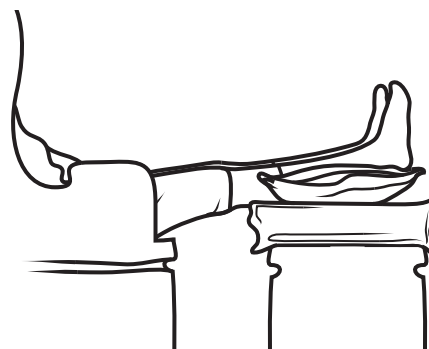
Keep ulcers covered and sterile (ulcers require moisture to heal).

Medical help

The ulcer will require regular dressings to keep it clean and free from infection. Special substances may be added to clean out the debris in the ulcer. A nurse may be able to call regularly to dress the ulcer. It is usually better to keep the dressing on for a few days. You will be provided with a knee-high elastic bandage or a thick elastic stocking to wear during the day. It may be necessary to apply a skin graft to promote the healing.



An elastic bandage helps healing



Rest and elevate the legs as much as possible

Remember

- Keep your leg elevated as often as possible.
- Keep the leg compressed with a firm bandage, tights or support stockings.
- Avoid further knocks and other injury.