

# How to Keep Your Skin Healthy and Prevent Pressure Injuries

**Pressure injuries** (also known as bed sores or pressure ulcers) develop when your skin is damaged by pressure. This can happen if you spend most of your day in a chair or bed. Pressure sores can be painful, hard to heal and may lead to serious infections.

**The good news is that most pressure injuries can be prevented.**

While you are in the hospital, your health care team will work with you to keep your skin healthy.

Read this booklet to learn how!



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## What is a pressure injury?

A pressure injury is damage to the skin, the tissues underneath the skin, or both.

The damage is caused by **pressure** or **shear**.

This disrupts blood supply. Without blood supply, the skin and tissues don't get the oxygen and nutrients they need. They soon begin to show signs of injury.

- **Pressure** happens when you sit or lie in one position too long. It can also happen when medical devices (such as an oxygen mask, tubes, drains or splints) press against your skin. Pressure cuts off the blood supply to that area of the skin.
- **Shear** happens most often when you slide down in your bed or chair, during repositioning and transferring. The skin against the bed or chair doesn't move with the rest of your body. It gets pulled and stretched. This can tear tiny blood vessels and disrupt the blood supply.

## Signs of a pressure injury

- Changes in skin colour – turning red, purple or dark
- Pain or discomfort
- Blisters



If pressure or shear continue, the damage gets worse. The skin breaks down and open sores (ulcers) may form. Broken skin can take a long time to heal and may become infected. Sores can get larger and deeper, reaching muscle and bone.

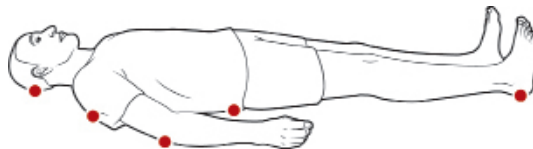
## Where can pressure injuries happen on your body?

Pressure injuries can happen anywhere there is constant pressure on the skin.

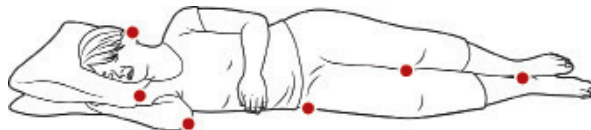
They are most common on bony parts of the body, such as heels, elbows, hips, and tailbone (sacrum).

The dots below show where pressure injuries commonly develop.

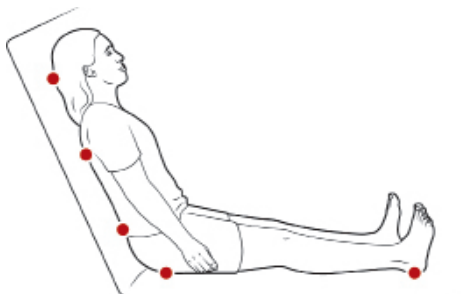
**When lying on your back**



**When lying on your side**



**When sitting in bed**



**When sitting in a chair**



## Who can get a pressure injury?

Anyone can get a pressure injury, but some people are more likely to develop one than others.

You are more likely to get a pressure injury if you:

- have difficulty moving and cannot easily change positions
- cannot feel pain or pressure on your skin
- have skin that is often wet from sweat, urine or bowel movements
- are not eating well or drinking enough
- have poor blood flow
- are an older adult with thin, fragile skin
- have medical devices against your skin
- have had a pressure injury before

Things that increase your chance of getting a pressure injury are called **risk factors**.

The more risk factors you have, the greater your chance of getting a pressure injury.

## What care can I expect in the hospital?

When you come to the hospital, a nurse will check your skin and assess your risk of developing a pressure injury. The nurse will share this assessment with you, your family and the other members of the health care team. Together, you will make a plan of care to keep your skin healthy.

If your risk of getting a pressure injury is high, you may need a physiotherapist, occupational therapist and/or a registered dietitian on your health care team. Each of these health care providers has special knowledge and skills that will help prevent pressure injuries.

## Your Care Plan for Healthy Skin

<b>1 Talk to your health care team</b>	
<p><b>What you can do:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check all areas of skin especially pressure points, such as your heels, elbows, hips and tailbone.</li> <li>• You may need a mirror or someone to help you.</li> <li>• Tell your nurse right away if you notice any signs of a pressure injury like pain, change in colour or blisters, even if telling the nurse might be a little embarrassing! Damaged skin needs care very early so it does not become a larger, open wound.</li> </ul>	<p><b>How team members can help:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regularly check your skin if you are unable to do so.</li> <li>• Regularly assess your risk of developing a pressure injury.</li> </ul>
<b>2 Reposition and move as often as you can</b>	
<p><b>What you can do:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk and move about as much as you can. Do gentle arm and leg exercises when you are in bed or sitting in a chair.</li> <li>• Change positions at least every 2 hours in bed. Shift your weight every 15 minutes when sitting.</li> <li>• Ask for help when needed.</li> <li>• Do not drag your bottom when getting out of bed or transferring to your chair.</li> </ul>	<p><b>How team members can help:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with you about how often to be up sitting in a chair or walking, to relieve pressure and gain strength.</li> <li>• Talk with you about how often to change positions in bed. Prompt or help you to change positions if needed.</li> <li>• Help you learn to transfer safely from bed to chair.</li> <li>• Help you strengthen muscles and keep moving.</li> </ul>

### 3 Keep pressure off your skin

#### What you can do:

Talk to your health care team about what's best for:

- Angle or position of the bed
- Positioning and using pillows for support
- How to keep clothing and linen from causing pressure

#### How team members can help:

- Show you how to adjust your bed to keep it at a 30 degree angle or lower. Raising it higher can make your body slide down, which harms your skin.
- Show you how to position yourself with pillows or wedges to relieve pressure on certain areas of skin.
- Assess your need for equipment such as a special seat cushion or mattress that reduces or spreads out pressure.
- Show you how to use the equipment you need.

### 4 Keep your skin clean and dry

#### What you can do:

- Wash your skin with mild soap and water, using a soft cloth. Do not rub your skin. Rinse and pat dry.
- Change incontinence products (such as briefs and bed pads) and clothes as often as needed to keep your skin dry. Moisture makes skin more fragile.
- Apply a barrier cream to protect skin from moisture.

#### How team members can help:

- Talk to you about the best way to keep your skin clean and dry.
- Help you with bathing, toileting and skin care as needed.

## 5 Eat well and drink enough fluid

### What you can do:

- Talk with your health care team about how much fluid to drink and what to eat while in hospital.

### How team members can help:

- Help you choose what to eat and drink for healthy skin, faster healing and better overall health.

## Other steps that are important for you:

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## What happens if I develop a pressure injury?

Not all pressure injuries can be prevented, so it is important to notice and care for changes in the skin as soon as possible. Early skin care when changes happen can prevent more damage and infection.

If you have signs of a pressure injury, you and your health care team will adjust your plan of care. Steps will be added to relieve pressure on that area and treat the damaged skin.

## Where can I get more information?

Visit one of our UHN **Patient and Family Libraries** and talk to a Librarian to find reliable health information in person, in print or online.

Website: [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca)

- Select “More information about Libraries”

Also, you can talk to a member of your health care team for more information.

## Summary

### Keep your skin healthy and prevent pressure injuries

A pressure injury (also known as a bed sore or pressure ulcer) is damage to the skin and underlying tissues. Constant pressure on one area of skin is the most common cause. This can happen when you sit or lie in one position too long. Damaged skin needs care right away or the injury can become very serious.

#### Check your skin every day for these warning signs

- ☐ Changes in skin colour – turning red, purple or dark
- ☐ Pain or discomfort
- ☐ Blisters
- ☐ Firm, warm or cool areas

If you notice any of these signs, stay off the area and tell your health care team right away!

#### Take action to prevent a pressure injury

Speak with your health care team and follow their advice on skin care, positioning and healthy diet and activity.



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