

Leg Ulcers



What you need
to know

What is a Leg Ulcer?

A leg ulcer is a wound that occurs between the ankle bone and the knee that has been there for more than two weeks

Causes and risk factors for Leg Ulcers

- Poor circulation (venous or arterial disease)
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Obesity
- Immobility
- Reduced mobility - this can weaken the calf muscle which can affect circulation within the veins.
- Previous leg injuries or surgeries
- Previous blood clot in legs - commonly known as a DVT
- Varicose Veins
- Occupation - jobs that involve standing for long periods of time



Causes of Venous Leg Ulcers

Venous leg ulcers are the result of damage to the veins within the lower limbs - this is known as venous disease.

Veins have valves in them, when the valves are damaged these no longer work correctly. This results in pressure building up in the veins causing fluid to leak out into the tissues causing swelling. Changes to the skin may include hardening, swelling, dryness and sometimes, itchy flaky skin.

If the leg is scratched / knocked this can cause a wound to the leg and as the veins not working properly can slow the healing process. These wounds are known as leg ulcers.

What does a Venous Leg Ulcer Look Like?

A venous leg ulcer occurs between the ankle bone and knee. The ulcer is usually shallow. It can be small or large in size. The ulcer will generally be irregular and uneven in its shape. It will generally have some fluid (known as exudate) leaking from the wound. In venous leg ulceration exudate levels can be higher.



Signs and symptoms of Venous Leg Ulcers

You may notice all or some signs and symptoms of leg ulceration

- Swollen ankles or legs (oedema).
- Discolouration to the surrounding skin to the ulcer
- Hardened skin.
- Heavy or achy feelings in your legs.
- Scaly, itchy or flaky skin to your legs – commonly known as varicose eczema.
- Swollen, bulging or enlarged veins that you can see on your legs known as varicose veins.
- Pain in the ulcer location or surrounding skin.



What should you do if you are concerned?

Contact your GP or healthcare professional if you experience

- Pain or discomfort (may be worse when legs are down)
- Swelling in the legs or ankles
- If you notice any wound on your leg
- Itching or a rash near the wound
- Discoloration or hardening of the skin on your legs
- Discharge (pus or fluid) from the ulcer
- If you notice a smell from your wound

Contact your GP or healthcare professional immediately if:

You think your ulcer is infected and you feel unwell

Diagnosis of a Venous Leg Ulcer

In order to diagnose a venous leg ulcer your healthcare professional will undertake a full assessment which includes:

- A general assessment of your medical history, health and current medications.
- A lower limb assessment to assess for signs and symptoms of venous disease.
- An Ankle Brachial Pressure Index - also known as a Doppler to rule out arterial disease. This involves measuring the blood pressure at your ankles and comparing it to the pressures in your arms.
- A thorough assessment of your wound.

Following this assessment your healthcare professional will work with you to agree a plan of care to help manage the symptoms you may and help your wound to heal.

Sometimes the assessment may identify that your ulcer is caused by another reason such as: Arterial disease or a combination of venous and arterial compromise which is commonly referred to as mixed disease.

Depending on your doppler results your healthcare professional will suggest compression therapy / support for your lower limb. This can be offered in a variety of ways - bandages, compression socks or compression wraps. It is important that these are used as advised to give your wound the best chance of healing.

Please don't be afraid to ask questions of your healthcare professional if you are unsure or need clarification

Helping your ulcer heal

You can support the healing of your leg ulcer by

- Follow treatment instructions carefully.
 - Eat a healthy diet and maintain good fluid input to support healing.
 - If undertaking wound dressings yourself, ensure you are following the plan of care agreed with your healthcare professional.
 - Wear compression / support garments if prescribed.
 - Keep your leg elevated when sitting.
 - Stay active, gentle walking helps circulation.
 - Avoid smoking - it slows ulcer healing.
 - Control diabetes, blood pressure, and cholesterol.
- *If you are struggling to achieve any of these please discuss with your healthcare professional.**



Preventing future ulcers

Wear compression / support garments daily (if advised).

Keep your skin moisturised to prevent cracking.

Avoid standing or sitting for long periods.

Check your feet and legs regularly for early signs of skin damage.

Keep other medical conditions well managed.

Contact your healthcare professional with any concerns.

