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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Preventing Pressure Injuries

This information explains how you can prevent pressure injuries.

## About Pressure Injuries

A pressure injury is a sore on your skin or the tissue below it. You can get them when a part of your body is under pressure for a long period of time. The pressure can come from lying in bed or sitting in a wheelchair for too long. Pressure injuries are also called bedsores or pressure sores.

Pressure injuries often happen over bony areas, such as your tailbone, hip, or heel of your foot. They can also be caused by medical devices, such as splints or feeding tubes, that rub against your skin.

The first sign that a pressure injury is forming is usually skin that turns red or purple. People with light skin usually get red patches. People with dark skin usually get purple or blue patches. The skin may get darker and start to hurt, burn, or itch. Sometimes a pressure injury

can turn into an open wound.

A pressure injury can look like a red patch of skin, an open wound, or a sore. Pressure injuries are sometimes painful.

## **Risk Factors for Pressure Injuries**

You may be at risk of getting a pressure injury if you:

- Had one in the past.
- Lay in bed or sit on a chair for long periods of time.
- Have trouble moving some parts of your body or trouble changing positions often.
- Are very sick or are recovering from surgery and need to lay in bed for a long time.
- Have conditions that can affect how much blood flows to your skin, such as diabetes and heart disease.
- Have conditions that can reduce the amount of pain or discomfort you feel, such as nerve or muscle disorders. This can cause you to not notice when a pressure injury is forming.
- Do not get enough nutrients from your diet or do not drink enough liquids to keep your skin healthy.
- Have weak skin, skin that breaks easily, or broken skin.

- Use medical devices that touch your skin, including feeding tubes or orthopedic devices, such as a cast or boot.
- Have increased skin moisture from sweating, having a fever, or incontinence (not able to control bladder or bowel actions). Moist skin can break easily. This increases your risk of getting a pressure injury.

## **How to Prevent Pressure Injuries**

### **Check your skin**

One of the best ways to prevent pressure injuries is to check your skin. Do this at least twice a day when you're sitting or lying down for a long time. Look for any redness on your skin, especially around bony areas like your tailbone or hips.

If you have a medical device that touches your skin, remove it, if possible. Check the skin underneath it at least twice a day. Ask your family, doctors, or nurses to help you check your skin, if needed.

Tell your healthcare provider if you feel any pain or see areas that are:

- Red
- Cut or open
- Blistered

## **Move your body**

Reduce pressure on certain areas of your body by moving around. Try to move around and change your position as often as you can. This can seem hard if you use a wheelchair or are bedridden, but even small changes can help. Here are some examples:

- If you're in a wheelchair or must sit in a chair for long periods of time:
  - Change your position every 2 to 4 hours.
  - Do not sit on doughnut-shaped pillows (round pillow with hole in the middle). Sit on a pressure relief cushion instead. Ask your healthcare provider for suggestions on which pillow to use.
  - Lift your buttocks when changing positions. Do not drag your body. Ask your family, doctors, nurses, and nursing staff to help you change your position, if needed.
- If you're staying in bed for long periods of time:
  - Change your position at least every 2 to 4 hours.
  - Try not to lie on the bony areas of your body. Ask your family, doctors, nurses, and nursing staff to help you change your position, if needed.
  - Raise the head of your bed as little as possible

unless it's unsafe for you to lie flat. This will put less pressure on your buttocks

- Use pillows between your knees and ankles to keep them from touching.
- Place a pillow under your lower legs to keep your heels raised and off the bed.

## **Take care of your skin**

- After showering or bathing, put moisturizer or lotion on your skin. This can help keep your skin from breaking or cracking.
- If you're incontinent, clean your genital area (vaginal or penis area) as soon as you can. Put on a skin barrier ointment or cream to protect your skin and prevent it from breaking.
- Do not rub or massage the bony parts of your skin if they're red. This can hurt your skin and the tissues under it.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of liquids. If you're on a restricted diet, talk with a clinical dietitian nutritionist for suggestions. You need a diet with enough calories, protein, fluids, vitamins, and minerals for your skin to stay healthy.

Tell your healthcare provider if you're concerned about

the health of your skin. They will help you prevent pressure injuries.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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