

Preventing pressure ulcers

Information for patients and carers

This leaflet explains how to prevent pressure ulcers and what to do if one develops.

What are pressure ulcers?

Pressure ulcers, also known as bed sores or pressure sores, are areas of your skin that are discoloured or broken. They can be serious if you do not take care of them.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can develop pressure ulcers, but you are more likely to get them if you:

- have problems moving
- do not eat well or drink enough fluids
- have skin that is always moist from incontinence, sweat or weeping wounds
- have certain medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, lung disease, neurological diseases or paralysis
- have problems with sensitivity to pain or discomfort caused by diabetes, stroke, neurological diseases, paralysis and certain painkillers
- have a spinal cord injury causing loss of sensation
- have poor circulation because of vascular disease or smoking
- are underweight or overweight
- have skinfolds
- have dry, swollen (oedematous) skin or a poor skin condition
- are very ill, injured or have had complicated surgery
- have current or previous wounds in any of the places where pressure ulcers usually develop
- have had pressure ulcers in the past
- are a smoker.

Confirming your identity

Before you have a treatment or procedure, our staff will ask you your name and date of birth and check your ID band. If you do not have an ID band we will also ask you to confirm your address. If we do not ask these questions, then please ask us to check. Ensuring your safety is our primary concern.

What causes pressure ulcers?

You can get pressure ulcers when you are ill because you may not be able to change your position very often. You can also get them if you suffer from a long-standing condition that makes it difficult for you to move.

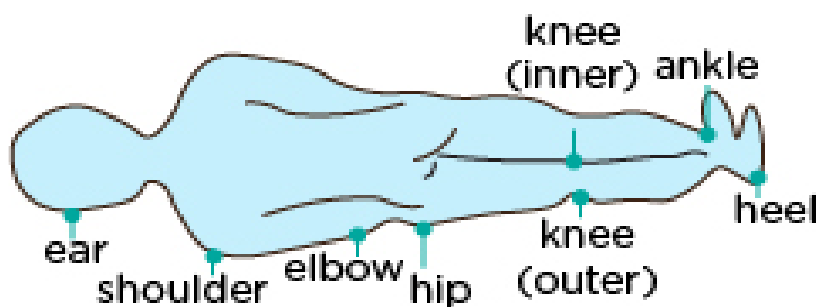
They are caused by:

- **pressure** – where you sit or lie in one position for long periods of time with the weight of your body concentrated in one place
- **friction** – where the top layers of your skin are rubbed away, causing blisters or sores.
- **shear** – where you do things such as:
 - sliding or slumping down in your bed and/or chair
 - sitting on a chair that is too wide, small, high or low for you
 - sliding down your bed and pushing yourself back up
 - not moving from your bed to your chair or repositioning yourself in bed correctly
 - rubbing and/or massaging
 - clothing and/or footwear that does not fit properly
 - straps, hoists and other similar equipment

For example, dragging yourself up your bed or slipping down in a chair can cause friction or shear.

Where do they develop?

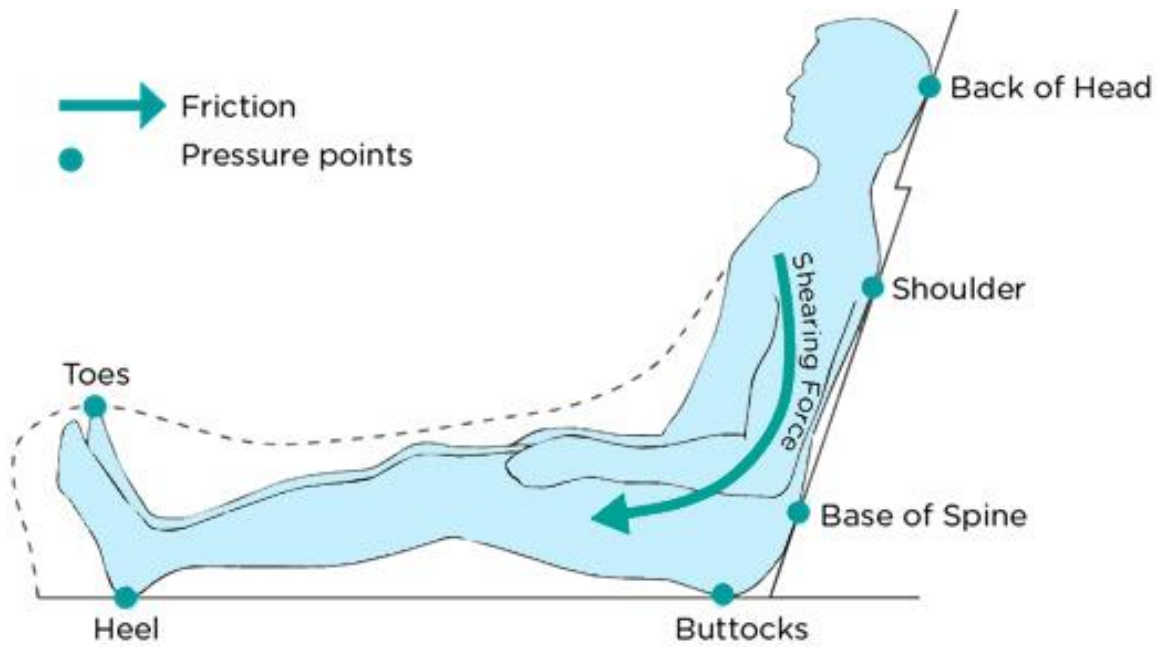
You are most likely to get pressure ulcers on the parts of your body shown in the pictures 1 to 4 below. They show common sleeping and sitting positions so you can see how important it is to move often to ease pressure on these spots.



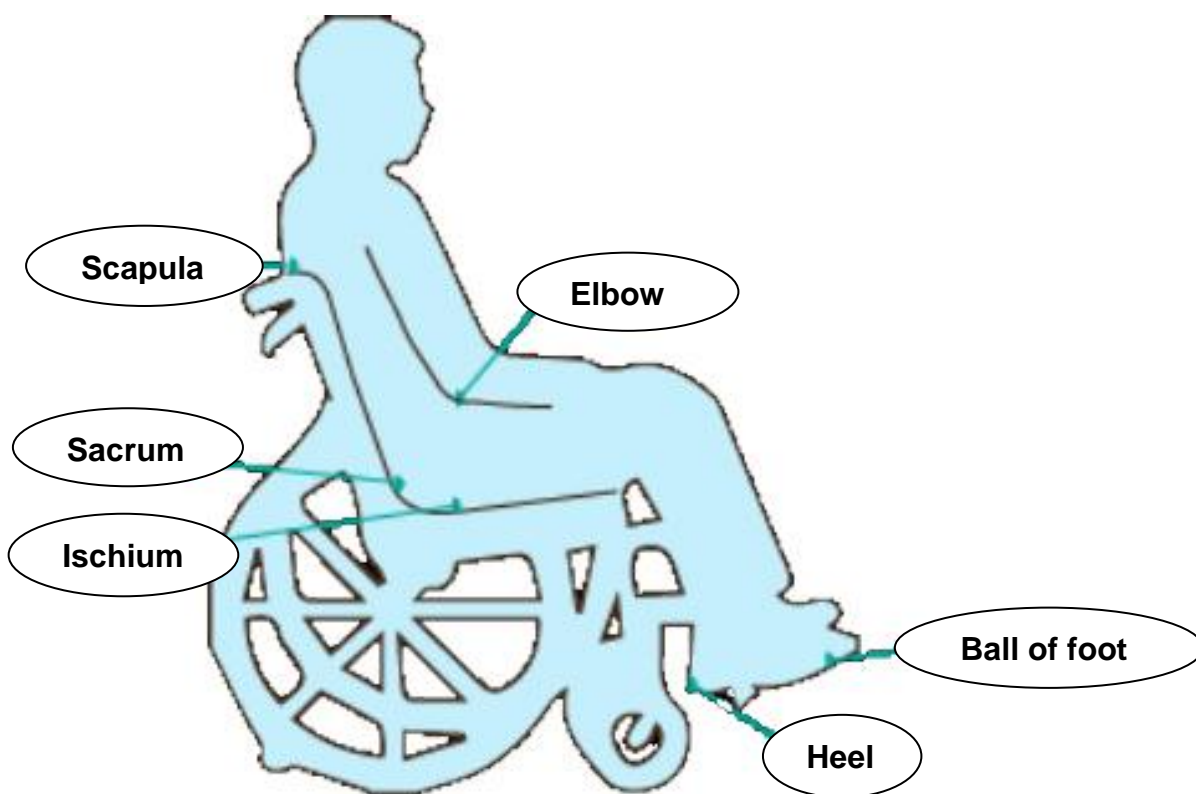
Picture 1: parts of your body at risk of a pressure ulcer if you tend to sleep or rest on your side.



Picture 2: parts of your body at risk of a pressure ulcer if you tend to sleep or rest on your back.



Picture 3: parts of your body at risk of a pressure ulcer if you tend to sit up in bed. It also shows the way that the shearing force works against your skin to cause pressure ulcers.



Picture 4: parts of your body at risk of a pressure ulcer if you are sitting in a chair or use a wheelchair.

How can I stop myself from getting pressure ulcers?

We will assess your risk of getting pressure ulcers and work out a plan to help prevent them from developing. You and your carer can also help to prevent them by following the 'Things you can do' guidelines below.

Things you can do....

1 Care for your skin

It is important to check your skin for damage (red areas) at different times during the day. If you have a darker skin tone you may not see signs of redness but the colour of the affected area may differ from the surrounding skin or the area may be painful, firm, soft, warmer or cooler. If you cannot check your skin yourself, your carer or healthcare staff will do it for you. You can use a mirror to look at areas that are hard to see.

If you feel any numbness this means you need to change your position. If you are paralysed or diabetic, you may not always be able to feel this sensation, so it is very important your skin is checked regularly.

It is also important to keep yourself clean. But do not rub hard or fast when you are washing or drying yourself because this can damage your skin. Do not use too much soap and talcum powder because they can both make your skin too dry.

If you are diabetic it is even more important you take good care of your skin and check it regularly, especially on your feet. You must have well-fitting shoes and visit a podiatrist often who specialises in diabetic patients so they can find out any problems early.

2 Change your sitting or lying position often

It is very important to keep active and mobile so your skin gets enough blood and oxygen to help keep it healthy.

- Change your position often, whether you are in bed or sitting in a chair.
- When you are sitting in a chair, change your position every hour.
- When you are in bed, change your position every two to three hours.

Nursing staff can help you if you cannot move yourself. They may have special equipment to help you to move.

Physiotherapists can help you by teaching you the best way to change position yourself. They can also give you exercises to do. Staff will teach your carer the best way of helping you to change position.

3 Use equipment to help you

If you are at risk of developing pressure ulcers and you are in bed most of the time or you are unable to move yourself, we will provide you with a special air mattress (pressure redistribution mattress). We can also give you chair cushions. If you use a wheelchair, cushions will be supplied with it.

Your community health service can also provide you with one of these special mattresses to use at home. **But remember: these mattresses and cushions are only aids and you must keep changing your position.**

Do not use the following aids:

- water-filled gloves
- synthetic sheep skins
- genuine sheep skins
- ring-type cushions

4 Eat and drink to keep you healthy

Eat a well-balanced diet to help keep your general health good. Foods that contain the following are very good at keeping your skin healthy:

- protein
- vitamin C
- zinc



Meat-eaters can get protein from meat, fish and eggs.



Vegetarians can get protein from tofu, nuts, seeds and vegetables.



Fresh fruit and vegetables are a good source of vitamin C.



Zinc is found in fish, cheese, meat, nuts, seeds and some vegetables.

Also try to drink plenty of water because this helps to keep your skin hydrated. Drink at least 1.5 litres each day unless you are advised otherwise.

If you lose weight, lose your appetite or you are not eating healthily, then you can see a dietitian while you are in hospital or in the community. Ask your nurse or doctor about arranging this. It is important that you keep to any special diets that have been prescribed by your doctor or dietitian.

5 Get help if you have problems controlling your bowels or bladder

Difficulty controlling your bowels or bladder is called incontinence. Specialist continence nurses can advise you on how to manage this problem. Often you can improve it fairly easily. The most important thing is to keep yourself as dry as possible.

Main things to remember

Do:

- change your position regularly
- eat a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of water
- check your skin regularly
- take care of your skin
- get advice if you have problems controlling your bladder or bowels
- call your nurse or doctor if you are worried

Do not:

- rub your skin or any red areas that appear
- use a ring-type cushion
- use too much soap or talcum powder
- wear tight-fitting shoes
- pull bedsheets over your feet too tightly

Who can I contact with queries and concerns?

Please talk to your nurse or doctor on your ward.

Sharing your information

We have teamed up with Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in a partnership known as King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas'. To make sure everyone you meet always has the most up-to-date information about your health, we may share information about you between the hospitals.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: 01689 863252

Email: kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net