



# CARE OF AGEING SKIN



**JOY SINCLAIR**  
AGEING WELL CONSULTANT

The skin is the largest organ of the body and for SCI people it is of even greater importance to maintain and protect its health.

**P**ressure ulcers are one of the major complications of SCI and it is a topic you will be reminded of time and again. It's easy to become complacent about checking your skin every day, but the consequence of developing a pressure ulcer can be serious. It can result in weeks or even months of bed rest, and causes enormous disruption to your daily routines, work, social life, etc.

A pressure ulcer develops when continuous unrelieved pressure is applied to the skin. They usually occur over bony protrusions of the body, such as the heels, elbows, hips and base of the spine. Continuous pressure prevents blood flow through the tiny blood vessels, which then starves the tissue of oxygen and creates a build-up of waste products, creating a red mark. Once a red area is noticed you should adopt the 'stitch in time' mentality.

The skin is a living organ and with age becomes thinner as it loses its elasticity. Also, circulation becomes sluggish, which reduces the amount of nutrients reaching the skin via the blood. All of these factors make the skin more susceptible to breaking down.

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

### PRESSURE RELIEF

Carry out lifting and pressure-relieving actions regularly. Some people need to pressure relieve every 20 minutes or so, others can last longer, but over time you will come to know the tolerance levels of your skin. Some common examples of pressure relief are demonstrated below.

### FURTHER PRESSURE-RELIEF ADVICE:

- Try to avoid shearing damage to the skin during transfers. Shearing occurs when layers of skin slide over one another.
- Get into the habit of checking your skin before getting up in the morning and upon returning to bed. Checking your skin once or twice a day

must become part of your daily routine.

- Correct your seating position in the wheelchair. An occupational therapist can assist you in this, and some SCI Centres run seating clinics.
- Maintaining a good posture helps to keep the pressure evenly distributed.

### PERSONAL CARE:

- Keep your skin dry. A good reliable continence regime helps avoid leaking and accidents.
- Treat very dry skin with moisturisers.
- Keep your weight stable – not too heavy, not too thin.
- Your diet should be well balanced and contain plenty of protein to aid tissue repair.
- Keep well hydrated and try to drink two to three litres of fluids each day.
- Take extra care of your skin during and immediately after an illness.
- Inform new carers of exactly how you wish to be handled/treated.

### BEWARE OF THE FOLLOWING HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE INFLUENCES:

- **Smoking.** Smoking inhibits oxygen and other essential nutrients getting to the skin, and affects the arteries causing blood pressure to rise.
- **Inactivity.** Try to exercise as best you can, as activity will increase blood supply and therefore nutrients to the skin.
- **Depression.** If you have suffered from depression over a period of time it can lead to a degree of self-neglect.
- **Alcohol.** Try to stay within the Government's daily recommended guideline.
- **Medical conditions.** Be aware that conditions such as diabetes and anaemia can affect the skin and make it more susceptible to breaking down.
- **Swelling (oedema).** This should not be left untreated, particularly if occurring in the legs. This can weaken the skin further.







Pressure ulcers can appear on bony protrusions of the body, including the heels, elbows, hips, and base of the spine

**“Knowing what is normal for you is important. Try to learn to recognise any undesirable changes in the condition of your skin.”**

### EQUIPMENT:

- Clothing, particularly jeans and trousers, should not be too tight. Avoid putting objects such as keys in the pockets.
- Have a seat evaluation to make sure you're using equipment that's right for you. You can also ask for regular occupational therapy assessments.
- Maintain equipment, especially your wheelchair and cushion.
- Replace your mattress when it is no longer fit for purpose. You may need to change the type of mattress you have been using, especially if your weight has changed dramatically or your skin viability has changed.
- Use a hoist for transferring, as ageing skin is less resistant to shearing forces.

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN SIGNS YOU MAY NOTICE?

- Redness, bruising, swelling, shiny areas and hot spots.
- Blisters, cracks or dryness.
- Pain, if you have sensation.

### WHAT TO DO IF YOU OR YOUR CARER NOTICE THE START OF A PRESSURE ULCER

#### Take action immediately!

When you notice the first signs of a pressure ulcer it means the damage has already been done. The only way for the sore to heal is to keep the pressure off it, and bed rest will probably be the best option at this stage. Make sure you are not at risk of developing further problems in the process e.g. breathing difficulties.

When the affected area has healed you can resume your normal activities, slowly. Scar tissue from old pressure ulcers is weakened and prone to breaking down again.

### DO NOT IGNORE THE SIGNS

**Here, an SIA member shares his own personal experience of pressure sores.**

“Four years ago I managed to scrape my backside against the wheel of the chair while transferring to my bed, thereby creating a tear in the skin of about half an inch square. The wheel was covered with a towel but gave no protection, and the wound was about three layers of skin deep. Looking at it in the mirror it was immediately obvious there was going to be a long haul to recovery, but little did I realise just how much of a drag the whole issue was going to become over the next few years.

“After five weeks and three days of constant bed rest following the initial injury, save for bathroom activities and eating meals, the district nurse gave the all clear to resume normal life again.

“Things seemed to be going well for around three months before my left leg became cold and clammy while I was out of bed. While it was obvious that something was not quite right, a recurrence of my backside issue did not immediately spring to mind. One inspection was all it took to see that it was in fact the reason, and another fortnight of complete bed rest soon had things looking normal again.

“Now, this would be fine if it were the end of the story, but there has been a number of recurrences of exactly the same issue and it has involved more time on my bed than I care to think about.

“We all know how frustrating it is to have to lay there all day, not helped by the fact that there is no feeling of illness at all, but there really is no other answer. The healing process has been helped along on subsequent occurrences by experimenting with the use of Flaminal Forte, a gel which removes dead skin and disinfects the area, and it was a joy to see it work quite quickly. It was hugely encouraging, but like so many things it became less effective after multiple uses. Next came a plaster-type dressing called Duoderm, not a new product, but it has turned out to be highly effective on the most recent recurrence.

“So, here we are four years down the line. The latest recurrence has just about healed and, dare I say, the wound area has not looked so good in ages. I have learned that as soon as my left leg becomes cold and clammy, it is time to get on the bed and remove the pressure from my backside. Yes, it's frustrating to have the thing constantly on my mind and to be continually checking my leg, but you ignore the signs at your own peril.”

### SUMMARY

Knowing what is normal for you is important. Try to learn to recognise any undesirable changes in the condition of your skin.

Vigilance in monitoring your skin, maintaining the ideal bodyweight, and a good diet are key to the prevention of pressure ulcers. Remember, checking for the first sign of any change to your skin should be a twice-daily activity.