

## Skin Breakdown and Pressure Injuries

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### Pressure injuries

- A pressure injury (also called pressure sore, pressure ulcer or bed sore) is an area of the skin or underlying tissue fat, connective tissue, muscle or bone) that is damaged due to loss of blood flow to that area.
- People with SCI are at risk for getting pressure injuries for several reasons:
  - lost feeling below the injury level
  - slowed wound healing
  - muscle atrophy (wasting or shrinking)
  - changes in blood circulation
- Pressure injuries are formed when there is too much pressure on the skin for too long, such as sitting for long periods of time without shifting weight.
- Pressure injuries also can be caused by rubbing or friction, incorrect positions in your wheelchair, a bump or fall, wrinkles in clothing, and moisture from incontinence or leakage.
- There are four stages of pressure sores that describe how severe they are.  
Learn about the four stages and how to recognize them here:  
<http://www.msktc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare/Recognizing-and-Treating-Pressure-Sores>
- People who get pressure injuries sometimes end up back in the hospital or needing surgery to clean and close the wounds. Healing a pressure sore or recovering from surgery may need weeks or months of staying in bed until the area heals.

### How to prevent pressure injuries

- Perform pressure reliefs (also called pressure releases or weight shifts) regularly.  
Learn how at <http://www.msktc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare/How-To-Do-Pressure-Reliefs>.
- Perform (or have a caregiver perform) daily skin inspections.
- Learn the warning signs of skin damage:  
<http://www.msktc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare/Recognizing-and-Treating-Pressure-Sores>
- Make sure your wheelchair fits and seating posture is correct. Get your seating evaluated every five years if possible or if your body weight, structure (including foot or leg amputations) or posture changes. Women who are pregnant need a seating evaluation.
- Use pressure-reducing cushions or pads everywhere that you sit or lie down. This includes:
  - All equipment that you use in the bathroom
  - What you sit on when you drive or travel (such as cars, airplanes, trains).
  - Learn to maintain your pressure-reducing equipment and know what to do if your equipment has a problem.
- Keep your skin clean and dry by effectively managing your bowel and bladder and avoiding leakage or accidents.
- Avoid substances (alcohol, drugs) that make you sleepy, since this can cause you to forget to do pressure reliefs.
- Learn more: <http://www.msktc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare/Preventing-Pressure-Sores>

## Things to watch for as you age

- Your skin becomes thinner, dryer, and more fragile as you age. Older skin can get damaged more quickly and easily.
- People often lose strength and become less active when they get older, and shoulder problems may develop after years of pushing a wheelchair and doing transfers. These changes can make it harder for you to perform good pressure reliefs and transfers.
- At advanced age (or over time), you may need to do pressure reliefs more often or even change the way you perform pressure reliefs. You may also need to change your equipment or cushion.

## Pay attention to your feet

Feet that do not have normal feeling need special care. See the document about Foot Care after SCI.

### Additional resources:

- Taking Care of Pressure Sores at [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/pressure\\_sores.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/pressure_sores.asp)  
Kawasaki, G & Warm, C. (2007). *Taking Care of Pressure Sores*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System.  
Retrieved from [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/pressure\\_sores.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/pressure_sores.asp)
- Maintaining Health Skin: Part 1 at [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin\\_1.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin_1.asp)  
Kawasaki, G and Warm, C. (2006). *Maintaining Healthy Skin: Part 1*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System.  
Retrieved from [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin\\_1.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin_1.asp)
- Maintaining Health Skin: Part 2 at [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin\\_2.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin_2.asp)  
Kawasaki, G and Warm, C. (2006). *Maintaining Healthy Skin: Part 2*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System.  
Retrieved from [http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin\\_2.asp](http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/skin_2.asp)
- Skin Care and Pressure Sores in SCI at <http://www.msctc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare>  
Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center. (2009). *Skin Care and Pressure Sores in Spinal Cord Injury*.  
Retrieved from <http://www.msctc.org/sci/factsheets/skincare>

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**Disclaimer:** This information is not meant to replace the advice from a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.

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