



Living with your Venous Ulcer

A GUIDE FOR YOU AND
YOUR CAREGIVER



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have read the content*

Table of Contents and Completion Checklist

Content	Page	Read
Introduction	3	<input type="radio"/>
What is a Wound?	3	<input type="radio"/>
What is Wound Care?	4	<input type="radio"/>
I have a Venous Ulcer. What is that?	5	<input type="radio"/>
Things I can do to Help get my Venous Ulcer to get Better	7	<input type="radio"/>
What do I need to Know about Wound Dressings?	9	<input type="radio"/>
Will my Wound be Painful?	10	<input type="radio"/>
Is my Wound at Risk for Infection?	11	<input type="radio"/>
How does what I Eat and Drink affect my Wound?	13	<input type="radio"/>
Why should I Stop Smoking when I have a Wound?	15	<input type="radio"/>
How Can I Avoid Trauma to my Wound?	16	<input type="radio"/>
How to Change my Dressing	16	<input type="radio"/>
When to Call my Nurse	19	<input type="radio"/>
I am Ready for Discharge. What do I Need to Know?	19	<input type="radio"/>
Important Contact Information	21	<input type="radio"/>
Glossary of Terms	22	<input type="radio"/>

Introduction

Welcome to the CarePartners Wound Care Team! In the pages of this booklet we will tell you about how we can help you to help your wound.

This booklet is available in paper copy or on line at www.carepartners.ca. It is full of information to help you to understand what is going on with your body when you have a wound and what your body needs to heal the wound or, if it can't heal, to feel better.

Sometimes we have to use medical terms, so words in *italics and underlined* will be defined in the glossary at the end of the booklet.

Some information will have web links or a picture



of a computer beside it like this. This

means that there is more information either on the internet or on the CarePartners website. You can either click on the link or go to www.carepartners.ca and click on the Health Information tab.



What is a Wound?

A wound is any break in your skin. Sometimes wounds are called ulcers. The two words mean the same thing. There are many causes of wounds. Sometimes they are hard to heal. Your nurse or doctor will help you to know the type and cause of your wound and why it is having trouble healing. Treatment may include helping you to improve your nutrition, increasing your mobility and activity, removing sources of pressure or friction, addressing specific conditions such as diabetes, improving your blood flow and helping you to reduce the risk of you getting an infection or treating the infection if one is present.

To help your wound heal you may need to change some of your activities and habits. If you smoke, you will need to consider quitting or if you have diabetes you will need to really follow your diet and monitor your blood sugars. More about that later.

What is Wound Care?

Wound care includes all the activities of managing your wound including what you and your nurse will do to help your wound heal. The nurse will assess you and your wound to determine if your body is ready to heal and will apply dressings to support your wound. Your nurse may need to take pictures of your wound. They will ask you to consent to this.

Wound care also includes teaching you to be as independent as possible with your wound care.

At each visit your nurse will assess your wound to see how it is doing. Different kinds of wounds need different kinds of treatments and dressings. These may change over time. Your nurse may need to contact your doctor or other health professionals to discuss your wound or to get you a special referral if needed.

Sometimes your body is ready for healing and your wound needs minimal support. This is called a healable wound.

Sometimes your body needs specific things to heal your wound like special medication or devices. This is called a maintenance wound and in this case your nurse will discuss with you what needs to change or what you need to do to help your wound to heal.

Sometimes your body is unable to heal your wound. This is called a non- healable wound. In this case your nurse will help you to learn how to manage the symptoms you are experiencing to ensure that you are more comfortable and to reduce the risk of infection.

I have a Venous Leg Ulcer. What is that?

To stay alive and to be healthy your body requires fresh blood with lots of oxygen and nutrients (vitamins and minerals) to be delivered to all parts of the body all the time. Fresh blood is pumped from your heart through your lungs to pick up oxygen and then through your arteries to deliver the oxygen to every cell in your body. The blood circulates through your body and then returns to the heart and lungs to be replenished.

The blood vessels that take the blood back to your heart and lungs are called veins. Veins and arteries actually meet and the blood flows in a continuous loop.

Standing on your feet requires the blood to flow up hill. To get back to the heart and lungs the blood must overcome the effects of gravity. To prevent gravity from being able to pull the blood back down into your legs, your veins have one-way valves that open and close. But when the valves don't work, the blood backs up in your legs.

When you have damaged valves in your lower leg and it is harder for the blood to flow normally up your leg, your condition is called Chronic Venous Insufficiency (CVI). You are more at risk for this condition if you:

- Have had a previous blood clot in the leg,
- Have a job where you stand or sit for long periods or, you are not able to move much and spend most of your days in a bed or chair,
- Have been pregnant several times,
- Are overweight,
- Have had an accident where there was a fracture in the lower leg or ankle,
- Have had vein surgery or surgery, and/or
- Have had an infection in the leg called cellulitis

CVI takes years to become obvious. At first you may see varicose veins, then over the years you may start to notice swelling at your ankles at the end of the day, relieved by elevating your legs. In time your lower legs can become hard (fibrotic), itchy (dermatitis) and have a tanned appearance (hemosiderin staining). Finally, you will have trouble with wound healing if you injure your leg and it will be more and more difficult to reduce the swelling.



If you want to learn more about CVI check out the Cleveland Clinic at <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/16872-chronic-venous-insufficiency-cvi>

CVI and Wounds

If you get a wound on your leg from a bump or a scratch, because of the underlying CVI and swelling you may have trouble healing it. We call this kind of wound a Venous Leg Ulcer (VLU). The ulcer wasn't caused by your CVI, but the healing is impaired due to your CVI. Your nurse will teach you how you can help your ulcer to heal by changing your dressings and wearing compression wraps and stockings.



CVI and Compression

If you have CVI you will need to use compression on your lower legs (from toe to knee) in the form of wraps or stockings, for life. Compression wraps are bandages that help the valves in your leg to work more efficiently. This means that the blood will flow up the legs the way it is supposed to. Initially you will use compression wraps to get the swelling down in your legs. The wraps will be applied by your nurse 2 or 3 times per week.

Once the swelling is reduced and your wound is healed, you will be measured for stockings and your nurse will help you to order them. It takes time to get used to wearing compression all the time. You may find that you need to buy bigger shoes, and sometimes the compression wraps make your legs warm. Do your very best to stick with the compression because this is the most important part of your therapy and will actually make you feel better and reduce your risk for more ulcers over the long term.

Lower Limb Assessment

Before you start wearing compression, your nurse will need to assess the arteries in your legs to ensure that your legs will not be harmed by the compression. The nurse will ask you questions and look at both legs for signs of CVI. The nurse will also do a blood pressure test on your legs to assess the arterial blood flow to your feet. This is called an Ankle Brachial Pressure Index or ABPI. It will not hurt.

The ABPI does not tell you that you have CVI; it only confirms that it is safe to use the compression therapy on your legs. It is your medical history and the way your leg looks that tells the doctor or nurse that you have CVI. If you are using compression, you should have the ABPI repeated twice a year.

Things I can do to Help my Venous Ulcer to get Better

Complete this with your nurse. Check off as many of the things you think you can try to do to help keep yourself healthy and heal your wound.

I will Try These



Blood Flow:

I will wear my compression wraps or stockings as recommended by my doctor or nurse.

☐

I will elevate my legs above the level of my heart every day for at least an hour.

☐

I will put blocks under the foot of my bed to assist with raising my legs up during the night.

☐

When sitting I won't let the seat cut into the back of my legs, cutting off my circulation.

☐

When sitting I won't cross my legs or ankles.

☐

Skin Care:

I will moisturize my skin with pH balanced, non-perfumed moisturizers daily.

☐

I won't use antibacterial soaps, peroxide, iodine or alcohol on the skin around my wound as this can dry it out.

☐

Activity to increase Circulation:

I will check with my doctor to see if it is OK to start a regular walking program. If it is, I will start one.

☐

I will go for walks (how often?).

☐

I will use the treadmill (how often?).

☐

If I am sitting or standing for long periods I will get up and walk around every half hour.

☐

If I am overweight I will try to start a weight reduction program.

☐

If I smoke I will start a smoking cessation program.

☐

But First ... Let's Check in!

Sometimes a list of tasks can seem easy to do and because of that we can easily over-commit. Take a look through the list and really think about the tasks you committed to. Ask yourself these questions;

- Do these activities fit with my day to day activities?
- Barriers are things that stand in the way of you being able to complete an objective. Can you think of any barriers that might prevent you from accomplishing the tasks you selected? An example might be *I do not have a safe place to walk.*

Some of the barriers that prevent me from doing these things are:

- How can I overcome these barriers?
- How confident am I that I can complete the tasks
(0 is not confident at all and 10 is super confident)?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If your confidence score is less than 7, you might want to consider removing a ✓ mark or two. If your score is 7 or higher – give it a try!

After 2 weeks of trying to do these things reassess the list using the same process and if you feel confident enough, add a new task or two. Choose the tasks that are most important to you and you are most confident that you can complete.

Remember - you do not need to accomplish this all on the first day –

this is a journey!

What do I Need to Know about Wound Dressings?

Keeping a wound covered helps to prevent infection and promotes healing. You should always have a dressing on your wound.



Wounds should not be left open to the air to “breathe”. We don’t breathe through our skin! Oxygen is carried in our blood and gets to the wound by the blood. Normally we don’t allow wounds to dry out and form a scab because when this happens, the wound takes longer to heal, is much more painful, there is more scarring, and it is at greater risk for infection.

If your wound is healable the nurse will use a dressing that can stay on for several days, in some cases, for a week or more. This may sound surprising, and if you have come from hospital where dressings were changed every day it might worry you. Don’t worry! Now that you are home or receiving care at the clinic the kinds of dressings that will be used may be different than in the hospital. Think of them as a blister that is allowing your wound to heal underneath while at the same time protecting it from germs and trauma. You may be surprised to see how moist the wound is under the dressing. We want it to be moist, like the inside of your eye. This kind of moisture allows the new skin to grow and your wound to heal more quickly.

Sometimes your wound will have dead tissue like a wet or dry scab in it. This dead tissue is a barrier to healing and must be removed. Your nurse will use dressings to get rid of the dead tissue. This is called autolytic debridement. During this process you will notice some things that may concern you such as:

- Increased drainage,
- Odor when the dressing is removed; it should go away when the wound is cleaned,
- The wound may look larger.

Don't worry, these are all normal and part of the process but if at any time you are worried talk to your nurse.

Once the dead tissue is removed from your wound it should look moist, pink and slightly bumpy. This means it is ready to grow the new tissue it needs to heal.

If your nurse has determined that your wound cannot heal then they will not encourage autolytic debridement and the dressings will be different. They may use dressings that can be changed more often and that do allow the wound to dry out. Your nurse may paint antiseptic on the wound to help reduce the risk for infection. In both cases your nurse may teach you how to change your dressings. They will show you exactly what to do, order your supplies and check in with you on a regular basis to see how you are doing.

Refer to the section called "How to Change my Dressing".

Can I Shower or Bath?

- Bathing is not usually permitted when you have a wound because it is not good for the wound to soak in your bath water. You may need to have a "sink bath" while your wound is healing,
- There are two kinds of dressings – some dressings must be protected from water and some dressings are waterproof. Be sure to check with your nurse or doctor about what kind of dressing you have,
- If your nurse or doctor says it is ok, you can take the dressing off and shower,
- If you are permitted to shower, use a handheld shower, if you have one. Gently spray water from the top to the bottom of the wound allowing clean water to run over it,
- Do not use soap, shower gel, body lotion, talcum powder or other bathing products directly on your healing wound and do not rub the area as this might be painful and could delay healing,
- Swimming is usually not allowed with dressings, however if you have a waterproof dressing it may be ok. Again, check in with your nurse or doctor.

Will my Wound be Painful?

Sometimes wounds hurt. Pain can interfere with your daily activities, reduce your appetite and make it hard to sleep. It can even slow the healing process. Most pain can be treated effectively with medication or other therapy.

If you have pain from your wound talk to your nurse so that they can suggest medications or other therapy to reduce your pain. They may need to contact your doctor for a prescription.

You will be asked to rate the intensity of your pain with 1 being the least painful or no pain and 10 being the worst pain you have ever experienced. Your pain rating will change, and pain should decrease with the right dressing and as your wound heals.

Your nurse will want to know the answer to the following questions.

Write your answers on this chart to discuss with your nurse.

When does the wound hurt?

Rate your pain 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What makes your wound feel worse?

What makes it feel better?

The medication I will take for my wound pain is:

I take it every ____ hours.

Side effects I need to be aware of are:

If your doctor prescribes medication for your pain, please take it as prescribed. Sometimes people stop taking their medications because they feel better, but the reason they were feeling better is they were taking their pain medication! Follow the instructions; don't take the medication more often than prescribed.

If you aren't on routine pain medications, have medicine that you can take when you need it. Take your medicine about an hour before you are going to have your dressing changed so that it has a chance to get working. As your wound healing

progresses you may be able to reduce your pain medications. Talk to your nurse about this.

Is my Wound at Risk for Infection?

Sometimes venous leg ulcers can develop an infection.

There are many ways to reduce the risk of infection. Your nurse will teach you how:

- To perform hand hygiene by washing your hands or using antibacterial hand rub before and after you do your dressing,
- To keep your dressing supplies in a clean container and away from pets.

Your nurse has been trained to recognize the signs of infection. Some kinds of wound infections are called Superficial Infections.

This means that the germs are only on the surface of the wound. They won't make you sick, but they can slow wound healing. You may see an increase in drainage, odor, pain or some redness around the wound, but you won't have chills or fever because of it.

Superficial infection is managed with specialized antimicrobial dressings. Your nurse may decide to use one of these if they think your wound needs it. Your nurse will not take a swab when they determine that you have a superficial infection as swabs do not tell us if the wound is infected. We don't use antibiotics for a Superficial Infection.

Another, more serious kind of infection, is called Deep Tissue Infection. In this case the germs have spread to your body and are making you sick.

You may see redness and swelling spreading beyond the wound. The pain may increase, and you might spike a temperature or have chills. This kind of infection needs a prescription for antibiotics. Your nurse will take a swab if they think that you have a Deep Tissue Infection so that your doctor will know what antibiotics will be effective. If you are given antibiotics be sure to take them as prescribed and finish them.

If you think you have Deep Tissue Infection you should see your doctor right away or go to the nearest Hospital Emergency.

How does what I Eat and Drink Affect my Wound?

Wound healing requires good nutrition. Your body needs extra protein and vitamins and minerals to heal.

Here are some general guidelines to consider:

- Don't try to lose weight when you have a wound to heal

- Try to eat a variety of foods following



Canada's Food Guide

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canada-food-guides.html>

- Don't skip meals
- Your body needs fluids. Try to drink 6-8 glasses of water or other fluids per day. Drinks with caffeine can cause you to lose fluids, so do not count them in your total
- If you have been told to limit your fluid intake by your doctor, be sure you follow those instructions
- If you are on a restricted diet for some other reason it may be hard to get all your nutrients. Consult a dietician or a nutritionist for more information
- If you don't feel hungry try to eat smaller meals more frequently
- Weigh yourself once a week. If you are losing weight you may have trouble healing your wound so contact your doctor
- Take a multivitamin



If you find it hard to eat a balanced diet, try a protein shake or buy a food supplement. There are some recipes in our Nutrition Guide found on our website at www.carepartners.ca under the 'Health Information' tab.



Here are some examples of nutrients in foods:

Discuss these with your nurse. Circle the foods you will try to eat more often:

Vitamins & Minerals	Food Source
Vitamin C	Citrus fruits & juices (oranges, lemons, limes, grapefruit), berries, sweet peppers, Brussels sprouts, cantaloupe, tomatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, potatoes, bok choy, kimchi, sauerkraut.
Vitamin A	Liver, milk/dairy, eggs, fish oils, leafy green vegetables, orange and yellow vegetables.
Vitamin E	Delays wound healing. If you are taking a Vitamin E supplement stop while your wound is healing.
Zinc	Meat, fish, seafood, poultry, liver, eggs, milk, legumes, chick peas, whole wheat bread, wheat germ.
Iron	Meat, poultry, fish, organ meats, eggs, legumes, nuts, dried fruit, fortified breads, cereals and pastas, tahini, kimchi, sauerkraut.
Protein	Meat, fish fresh or canned, dried fish, dried meat, poultry, cheese, eggs, milk, yogurt, protein shakes, tofu, chick peas.

Why should I Stop Smoking or Vaping when I have a Wound?

Wounds must have oxygen to heal. We get oxygen when we breathe air in. If we have heart or lung disease the oxygen we breathe in cannot get to the wound. Smoking tobacco in any form can prevent your wounds from getting the oxygen they need. This is especially true if your wound is on your leg or foot or you have diabetes or heart disease.



It is estimated that one cigarette decreases the amount of oxygen in your blood for 1 hour. If you smoke a cigarette every waking hour, then all day you have reduced oxygen just from smoking.

We know that asking you to stop smoking is a really big deal. If you think you can or if you want help, check out the following resource:

Government of Ontario Support to Quit Smoking

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/support-quit-smoking>



If you can't quit, then consider trying to reduce the number of tobacco products you use in a day or maybe limit the time of day you smoke to after supper. Any tricks you can use to lower the amount you smoke will make a difference.

E-cigarettes and vaping (including marijuana) also have an impact on wound healing because they contain many of the same chemicals that are in cigarettes. Consider trying to reduce your use of e-cigarettes or vaping whenever possible.

Second hand smoke (the smoke from someone else smoking) can contain as many harmful ingredients as smoking and will affect your healing. If someone in your house smokes, ask them to try to go outside away from open windows. If they smoke in the garage, use a fan to blow smoke toward the outside.

Second hand smoke is unhealthy for the nurses caring for your wound too. Never smoke when your nurse is in your home.

How can I Avoid Trauma to my Wound?

Trauma can be anything that causes harm or injury to the area of the wound. Try to avoid:

- Tight fitting shoes,
- Bumping your leg on furniture or car doors,
- Pets and kids bumping you or jumping on you and hitting your wound.

Wounds can be easily damaged. Take care of your wound by protecting it from trauma.

How to Change my Dressing



You may be asked to pick up or purchase some items for the nurse to use when doing your wound care and to keep these items clean. Our nurse will provide you with sterile instruments. This may include forceps, scissors and a probe. Be sure that you or your nurse only use these instruments for your dressings.

Your nurse will show you how to change your dressing and tell you how long to keep the

dressing on between dressing changes. They will recommend specific products.

Talk to your nurse about showering or bathing in between removing the old dressing and applying the new one; your nurse and doctor will help you decide if this is safe for you and your wound.

6 Steps to Change Your Dressing

1. Prepare the area where you will do the dressing change
2. Gather your supplies
3. Remove the old dressing
4. Cleanse the wound
5. Apply the new dressing
6. Cleanse your equipment

Prepare the area

You will need a clean spot to do your care with good lighting. Remove kids and pets from the area.

Check off the supplies you need

- ☐ Alcohol based hand rub for your hands
- ☐ Adhesive remover
- ☐ Gauze pads
- ☐ Sterile normal saline
- ☐ No sting barrier film nor skin prep
- ☐ Tape
- ☐ Plastic sealable trash bag
- ☐ Clean towel to absorb spills
- ☐ Forceps and scissors if needed
- ☐ Dressings

Remove the Old Dressing

1. Clean your hands with soap & water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
2. Slowly lift the corners or edge of dressings, if it is sticky use the adhesive remover to loosen.
3. Hold down the skin and pull tape across the skin rather than pulling. If you have an adhesive dressing, anchor the dressing with one hand and stretch it away from the wound to loosen it. Do not tear your skin.
4. Throw away the used dressings in plastic bag.
5. Clean your hands again.

Clean the Wound

6. Place a towel under the wound.
7. Cleanse the wound with the saline the way your nurse showed you.
8. Use gauze to blot the surrounding skin around the wound.

9. Discard used gauze into the plastic bag.
10. Check the wound for redness, drainage, swelling or odour.

Apply New Dressing

11. Open new dressing & remove from the package. Only touch the corners.
12. Apply skin barrier or skin prep to the skin around the wound.
13. Center dressing over wound.
14. Secure with tape or, if the dressing is adhesive, smooth out the adhesive borders.
15. Discard packaging into plastic bag and seal the bag.
16. Clean your hands.
17. Put the plastic garbage bag in a larger garbage bag for disposal with your regular household garbage.

How to Clean my Equipment

Each time after wound care is completed, follow these directions to clean the instruments:

1. Fill a clean bowl with warm water and add dish soap,
2. Wash each instrument in the warm water removing anything visible,
3. Rinse the instruments under the tap with warm running water,
4. Lay instruments on a clean towel or paper towel and air dry them,
5. Once the instruments are completely dry, put them in a clean, plastic container with a lid or a clean, sealable plastic bag,
6. Close the lid of the container or seal the bag,
7. When it is time to do your wound care, remove the instruments from the container or bag and complete your wound care,
8. Repeat the cleaning procedure each time wound care is completed,
9. Once the wound is closed and no more wound care is required, safely dispose of the instruments.

When to Call my Nurse

Call your nurse if any of the following occur:

1. Increased pain at wound site or in your leg,
2. Toes that are becoming numb or turning blue after the compression bandage was applied,
3. Redness or swelling around the wound or spreading out,
4. Warmth around the wound site,
5. Foul odor from wound after you have cleaned it,
6. Change in colour or amount of drainage,
7. Fever chills or nausea.

I am Ready for Discharge: What do I Need to Know?

You and your nurse have agreed that it is time to discharge you from the home care program because your wound is closed or because you now have all the skill you need to look after it yourself.

There is still a lot going on under the surface of your wound. It can take up to 2 years for your wounded area to get back its strength. Even then it won't be as strong as it was before your injury because the new tissue is scar tissue and doesn't have all the characteristics of uninjured skin.

Always wear your compression wraps or compression stockings. Follow what you have learned to improve circulation in your legs and prevent swelling.

Always protect the area from pressure, trauma and other forms of injury.

If you have stopped or reduced smoking keep doing it!!!

If you need help

Glossary of Terms

Antimicrobial dressings: are used to reduce the number of micro-organisms in the wound which reduces the risk of infection.

Autolytic debridement: uses the body's own enzymes and moisture to re-hydrate, soften and finally liquefy hard eschar (scab) and slough (wet dead tissue) in the wound. Only dead tissue is liquefied. It is virtually painless for the patient.

Conservative sharps debridement: conservative sharp wound debridement (CSWD) is the removal of loose avascular tissue without pain or bleeding.

Deep tissue infection: infection in a wound that has reached the deeper layers of the body. A deep infection means that the whole body is infected, not just the wound and oral or IV antibiotics are needed for healing.

Germs: microorganism, especially one that causes disease.

Hand hygiene: cleaning hands to remove soil, dirt, and germs. If water and soap are not available, hands can be cleaned with alcohol based hand rub.

Healable wound: a wound that is ready to heal and all the patient factors make it able to heal; these factors include circulation, diet, devices etc.

Maintenance wound: a wound where healing has stalled due to factors that need to be corrected such as blood sugars in the person with diabetes or the purchase of specific equipment or perhaps remedial surgery.

Non-healable wound: a wound that cannot heal due to factors that cannot be corrected such as poor circulation.

Superficial infection: A wound infection that is localized to just the wound. The body is not infected and the patient does not need systemic antibiotics to heal.

Swab: a test that the nurse can perform by touching a special cotton tip applicator to a cleaned wound and then sending the applicator to a laboratory to see what microorganisms grow. The results from a swab tell the doctor what kinds microorganisms are growing on the wound and what antibiotics might work to treat infection.