Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

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. It can happen when one part of your body has pressure on it for a long time. This can happen if you lie in bed or sit 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 heels. They can also be caused by medical devices, like splints or feeding tubes, that rub against your skin.

The first sign of a pressure injury is usually skin that turns red, purple, or blue. 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 or dark patch of skin.
- An open wound or sore.
- A painful spot.

Risk factors for pressure injuries

You may be more likely to get a pressure injury if you:

- Had one before.

- Stay in bed or sit for long periods.
- Have trouble moving or changing positions.
- Are very sick or healing after surgery.
- Have health problems that can affect how much blood flows to your skin, like diabetes or heart disease.
- Do not feel pain well because of nerve or muscle problems. This can make it hard to 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, like feeding tubes or orthopedic devices, such as a cast or boot.
- Have moist skin from sweat, fever, or trouble controlling your urine (pee) or bowel movements (poop). Moist skin can break easily. This increases your risk of getting a pressure injury.

How to prevent pressure injuries

Check your skin

Check your skin at least twice a day if you sit or lie down a lot. 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, take it off, 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 or dark
- Cut or open
- Blistered
- Painful

Move your body

Moving helps reduce pressure on your skin. 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 sit in a chair or wheelchair:

- Change 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 stay in bed:

- Change 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 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

- Use lotion or moisturizer after showering or bathing. This can help keep your skin from breaking or cracking.
- If you have trouble controlling your bladder or bowels, clean your genital area (vaginal or penis area) as soon as they get wet. 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 healthy foods 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 to search our virtual library.

Preventing Pressure Injuries - Last updated on December 30, 2025
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center