

Decubitus Ulcers or "Bed Sores" or "Pressure Sores"

A Decubitus ulcer is a pressure or what is commonly called a "bed sore". This can range from a very mild pink coloration to the skin, which disappears in a few hours after pressure is relieved on the area, to a very deep wound extending to and sometimes through a bone into internal organs. These ulcers or wounds are classified just as other wounds according to the severity of the wound usually in four stages or types.

All Decubitus ulcers have a course of injury similar to a burn wound. This can be a mild redness of the skin and/or blistering such as a first degree burn to a deep open wound with a lot of blackened tissue in it such as a third or fourth degree burn. This black tissue is called eschar.

The usual mechanism of forming a Decubitus ulcer is from pressure. However, it can also occur from friction by rubbing against something such as a bed sheet, cast, brace, etc., or from prolonged exposure to cold. Any area of tissue that lies just over a bone is very likely to form a Decubitus ulcer. These areas include the spine, coccyx or "tailbone", hips, heels, and elbows, to name a few. The weight of the person's body presses on the bone, the bone presses on the skin and tissue that cover it, and the tissue is trapped between the bone structure and bed or wheelchair surface. This situation compresses the blood vessels in the skin and underlying tissues. This tissue then begins to decay from lack of blood circulation. This is basic mechanism for the formation of Decubitus. A contributing factor to the development of Decubitus ulcers is an altered nutritional state, [poor nutrition, weight loss, diabetes, etc.]. Additional contributing factors are poor hygiene, dehydration and a poor standard of nursing care to name a few.

STAGE I

This stage is characterized by a surface reddening of the skin. The skin is unbroken and the wound is superficial. This would be a light sunburn or a first degree burn as well as a beginning Decubitus ulcer. The burn heals spontaneously or the Decubitus ulcer quickly fades when pressure is relieved on the area. The key factors to consider in a Stage I wound are what was the cause of the wound and how to alleviate pressure on the area to prevent it from worsening. Improved nutritional status of the individual should also be considered early to prevent wound worsening. The presence of a Stage I wound is an indication or early warning of a problem and a signal to take preventive action. Treatment consists of turning or alleviating pressure in some form or avoiding more exposure to the cause of the injury as well as covering, protecting, and cushioning the area. Soft protective pads and cushions are often used for this purpose. An increase in vitamin C, proteins, and fluids is recommended. Increased nutrition is part of prevention.

STAGE II

This stage is characterized by a blister either broken or unbroken. A partial layer of the skin is now injured. Involvement is no longer superficial. The goal of care is to cover, protect, and clean the area. Coverings designed to insulate and absorb as well as protect are used. There are a wide variety of items for this purpose. Skin lotions or emollients are used to hydrate surrounding tissues and prevent the wound from worsening. Additional padding and protective substances to decrease the pressure on the area are important. Close attention to prevention, protection, nutrition, and hydration is important also. With quick attention, a stage II wound can heal very rapidly. Quick attention to a Stage I Decubitus ulcer or pressure wound will prevent the development of a Stage III Decubitus ulcer or pressure wound. Any Decubitus ulcer or pressure wound that develops beyond Stage II is generally from inattention.

STAGE III

The wound extends through all of the layers of the skin. It is a primary site for a serious infection to occur. The goals and treatments of alleviating pressure and covering and protecting the wound still apply as well as an increased emphasis on nutrition and hydration. Medical care is necessary to promote healing and to treat and prevent infection. This type of wound will progress very rapidly if left unattended. Infection is of grave concern.