

Venous Leg Ulcers

What causes venous leg ulcers?

The veins in your leg have special one-way valves that keep the blood moving back to the heart. Some people have valves or veins that don't work as well as they should. When this happens:

- blood "collects" in small veins under the skin and pressure builds up (especially near the ankle)
- fluid "leaks" out of these veins and damages the surrounding skin and tissue
- the damaged skin eventually breaks down to form an ulcer, particularly after a bruise or scratch
- the ulcers heal slowly because of poor blood circulation in the leg

How are venous leg ulcers treated?

Compression bandages prescribed by your doctor "squeeze" the veins to improve the flow of blood out of the leg and reduce the pressure in your leg veins. These bandages are the most important step in healing your ulcer!

Compression bandages are usually changed when ulcer dressings are changed. This may happen every day or once a week. It is best to apply compression bandages when your leg has been elevated for at least a few hours (preferably overnight). A visiting nurse or your local pharmacist can show you and/or a family member how to apply the bandages and care for your ulcer.

How do I take care of the ulcer wound itself?

Dressings	Dressings keep ulcers clean and moist, which helps them heal. The condition of the ulcer determines the appropriate type of dressing, which may change as treatment progresses. Change dressings as directed.
Skin care	If the skin around an ulcer is inflamed or scaly or itchy, your doctor can suggest the right cream to help soothe the ulcer. Some creams can actually make the problem worse.
Antibiotics	On occasion, ulcers get infected. If this happens, you may need an oral or intravenous antibiotic. Antibiotics and antiseptics applied directly to the ulcer are not very effective and may cause allergic reactions.
Other treatments	Your doctor will recommend treatment for other medical problems that may cause your ulcer to heal more slowly. Sometimes, a skin graft may be necessary if ulcers are very large or do not heal despite proper care. Surgery for varicose veins or other circulation problems may be appropriate for some patients (usually after the ulcer heals).

What else can I do?

1. Raise your feet regularly during the day and at night. This lets gravity draw fluid and blood away from your feet and legs, towards your heart. The higher your ankle, the lower the pressure in your leg veins!
 - Try to lie down several times each day (for about 30 minutes each time), with your legs raised above your heart. For example, lie on a sofa with your foot on a firm pillow.
 - At night, sleep with your feet a little higher (about 10 to 15 cm, or 4 to 6 inches) than your head. The best approach is to raise the foot of your bed with some blocks or books.
2. Avoid getting scratches, bruises, or burns on your legs.
3. Stay as active as you can. Walk and use stairs as much as you can during the day. The muscle in your calf (lower leg) works as a "pump" and helps to squeeze blood in your veins back to your heart.
If you have to spend long periods of time standing or sitting, occasionally flex and point your toes or stand on "tiptoes" a few times. This contracts your calf muscles and squeezes your leg veins.
4. Eat a healthy diet. If you are overweight, losing even a few pounds/kilograms can help.

How long will it take the ulcer to heal?

When compression bandages are used correctly and regularly, about 7 out of 10 venous ulcers heal in 3 to 4 months. This may seem like a long time, but remember that it has taken even longer for your venous problems to cause the ulcer.

How can I stop the ulcer from coming back?

Even after your ulcer heals, your vein problem remains, so take action to help prevent another ulcer!
The best thing you can do is to wear a compression stocking after the ulcer heals — **every day**. Compression stockings must be specially fitted. They gradually weaken, and should be replaced every 3 to 6 months.
Usually you should wear your stocking from the time you get out of bed in the morning until the time you go to bed at night. Stockings should be taken off when you have a bath or shower, or when you go to bed. You can buy a special stocking applicator to make it easier to put them on!

