

PRESSURE ULCERS

SKIN CARE SKILLS: HEALTH HABITS

After a spinal cord injury you need to pay special attention to your skin, probably a lot more than you ever did before. By building good habits and following key prevention strategies, you can keep your skin healthy.



Daily skin check

The first important part of your skin care program is doing a **daily skin check**:

- Check your skin for new marks or signs of redness on a daily basis, before you get out of bed in the morning and after you go to bed in the evening; if you need to, you can use a long-handled mirror.
- If you are unable to check your skin independently, make sure you can direct someone else to check it properly. Pay special attention to the boney areas.
- The first sign of a pressure sore is a red spot that may also be warm to the touch. In darker skin tones the area may look blue, purple or gray.



If you or your caregiver sees this spot, press on it with a finger. The colour should return back to your skin tone immediately. If this does not happen, take the pressure off the area, and monitor it. If the spot is not back to the colour of your skin in 2 hours, let your care team know. If you are not in the hospital, seek medical attention.

If your skin is broken or blistered, or if you notice an unusual smell or discharge in your clothing or wetness on your cushion, also get in touch with your health care provider.



Pressure Relief

Here's a good saying to remember: **If you want to prevent pressure sores, you need to practice pressure relief.**

Pressure on the skin from lying and sitting too long causes decreased blood flow to the skin. This in turn restricts oxygen and nutrients from flowing to the skin. Skin breakdown can occur as a result. People with normal sensation shift their weight naturally because being in one position for a long time starts to feel uncomfortable.

People with spinal cord injuries have altered sensation and need to develop good daily habits of shifting their weight often, in order to avoid putting continuous pressure on any one part of the skin.



At first, you'll want to work with your therapists to determine the best weight shifting options for you. They can help you with techniques to perform your weight shift effectively.

You may find you need to pay special attention to your body position and the pressure you are putting on different body parts, like your elbows, shoulder blades, feet. This can be

challenging if your sensations like touch and pressure are decreased, but over time you will develop good habits.



Pressure relieve every 15 to 20 minutes for 30 seconds or longer. The goal is to get to a point where you instinctively shift your weight on a constant basis during your daily routine. Here's how to develop these habits:

- Start by fully shifting your weight on a regular schedule, for example every 15 – 20 minutes for 30 seconds or longer;
- If you forget, try using an alarm or a timer to remind you to do your weight shift;
- Over time, you should find that you can include constant weight shifting and pressure relief into the rest of your activities.

Use these pressure relief techniques in your wheelchair:

- Lean forward onto a table, chair, desk or your knees.
- Lean from side to side
- Do a “push up” holding your armrests to lift your bum off the seat.
- Tilt your chair back as far as you can tolerate if you have this feature in your chair.

Use these pressure relief techniques in your bed:

- If you are newly injured, you should turn at least every 2 hours in bed into a half-side lying position. This may change over time.
- Alternate sides and use pillows to position yourself for support.
- The goal is to reduce pressure on your tailbone and on hip bones.
- If you are not able to do this yourself, ask your caregiver for help.



Cushions and Equipment

Maintaining good posture and positioning is very important and can save your skin. Make sure you take the time or instruct your caregiver on how to position you: you'll be more comfortable and you'll avoid skin problems.

While you are in the hospital, your occupational therapist will help you choose the **equipment** that is right for you. This may include a bed, a mattress, a wheelchair cushion, as well as bathroom equipment like a shower commode or a bath bench and a raised toilet seat. Once you have the right equipment, it's important for your own safety to keep it clean and in good working order. Watch out for anything that could catch, rub, or otherwise harm your skin. Your therapist will write a prescription you will need to purchase some of these items. When it comes to wheelchair **cushions**, there are different types like air, foam, gel, fluid, and a combination of these. There are also different shapes and sizes. The first time you choose a cushion, your therapist will work with you to find the best option.

When you try a new cushion, you should carefully check your skin for redness. After discharge from the hospital, if you are having problems with skin or posture, or if your circumstances change, you will need to **re-assess your fit**. You may be able to access

outpatient services like the seating clinic or an occupational therapist to help you as your needs change over time.

You may want to take a cushion with you when travelling on a plane or going on a long drive. And you may require more than one cushion for different activities, like sports.



Take care to follow safe **transfer techniques**. Avoid scraping or rubbing your skin on your rear end or your legs and feet when you transfer.

Clothing

When you're going shopping for clothes and shoes after a spinal cord injury, you need to keep these things in mind:

- Take care to avoid pressure build-up from clothes on your skin;
- You may choose to buy your clothes a size bigger;
- Be careful on how your clothes fit on your body. If they're too tight, they can cause a problem, but if they're too loose and wrinkled, you could end up sitting on a crease;
- You should definitely avoid sitting on buttons, zippers, pockets and other items that can cause pressure points;
- You may choose not to wear undergarments because of the seams that can cause a pressure area.
- And finally, be careful with abdominal binders and leg bags, especially straps that are too tight.



Nutrition

Another important prevention strategy is good **nutrition**. Spinal cord injury affects many body systems including digestion. The right foods in the right amounts can help you stay healthy. Healthy diet gives you energy and helps prevent secondary complications like pressure sores. Keep skin healthy by eating a balanced diet. Make sure you eat enough protein, especially if you have a wound that is healing and drink 1 ½ to 2 litres of water every day. Follow these recommendations unless you have a specific condition. Please consult your dietician.



Hygiene Habits

It is important to keep **moisture in balance** and good hygiene habits. Dry skin results from many causes, including thyroid problems, medication, and extreme weather. You may find it helpful to apply moisturizer to your skin on a regular basis. Wet skin is fragile. Make sure you dry yourself off thoroughly after showering—especially the nooks and crannies. Also, problems with bladder or bowel accidents can leave the skin wet and vulnerable to breakdown.



Keep your toenails trimmed—you may need to see a health care professional for help with this.



Physical Activity

Start with small amounts of exercise then gradually increase how long, how often, how hard. The SCI Action Canada Guidelines recommend at least 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity twice a week; and strength training twice a week. Please consult your physiotherapist about the type and intensity of exercise that is right for you.

Smoking

Quitting smoking is a difficult thing to do. Talk to the member of your health care team – they will help you with resources and strategies to quit.



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