

# Foot Ulcers

An information guide



# Foot Ulcers

## What is a foot ulcer?

An ulcer is a medical term for an open sore. Foot ulcers are serious and can take weeks or months to heal. Occasionally they can deteriorate and lead to severe infection, gangrene or amputation.

## What causes foot ulcers?

- Ill-fitting footwear
- Injury
- Walking barefoot
- Poor foot hygiene
- Dry skin
- Overgrown/ingrowing nails

Foot deformity, poor blood supply or nerve damage to the feet can increase the risk of foot ulcers.

## How are foot ulcers treated?

Following an assessment, a plan of treatment will be agreed between yourself and your consultant / podiatrist / nurse. This will include:

**1 - Debridement** when appropriate. Debridement is a term used to describe the removal of hard skin, or dead or infected tissue. Debridement is not normally painful. Research shows that debridement helps foot ulcers to heal faster.

Benefits of debridement:

- Reveals the full size and depth of the ulcer
- Reduces pressure on the edge of the ulcer
- Reduces the risk of trapped infection.

Following debridement the ulcer may appear bigger, or may bleed, but it will be a cleaner ulcer. The quickest and usually the best way to debride ulcers is with a sterile scalpel blade. Sometimes a suitable dressing may be applied to encourage the ulcer to debride itself.

**2 - Pressure relief** is a crucial part of your treatment plan. Any pressure exerted on your ulcer, either from footwear or from walking, will slow down the healing process. There are many different ways of taking pressure off your ulcer. This can include insoles and removable/non removable casts. You and your podiatrist can decide together which would be best for you.

**3 - Regular dressing** of your ulcer – there are many different kinds of ulcer dressings, your podiatrist / nurse will suggest the best one for you.

### **Will I need special tests?**

Sometimes tests may be necessary, these may include:

- A swab or a tissue sample from the ulcer to help identify bacteria which may be causing infection
- Circulation tests on your legs and feet
- Blood tests
- X-ray or scan to help determine if infection is in the bone.

### **Do I need to take antibiotics?**

Only if your ulcer is infected. You will receive individual advice if you develop an infection. Antibiotics may be started as oral or intravenous.

### **How long do I need to take antibiotics for?**

7 days to several months depending on how deep the infection is. You need to take your antibiotics regularly and complete the course. Report diarrhoea and vomiting immediately to your prescriber.

## Do's and Don'ts

- **Do** rest your foot as much as possible, keeping your legs elevated
- **Do** keep your blood glucose controlled if you have diabetes. This is very important to help healing take place. Talk to your doctor or nurse
- **Do** give up smoking – ask your doctor, nurse or podiatrist for advice
- **Do** keep your dressing in place and keep it dry. If you have problems with your dressing contact your podiatrist or nurse
- **Do** use any special footwear / insoles you have been provided with
- **Do** inform your consultant/podiatrist if you have changed any of your medication
- **Do** remember to bring a list of current medication with you to each appointment
- **Don't** sit or stand in one position for a long time
- **Don't** sit too close to the fire or heater
- **Don't** stop taking antibiotics in the middle of a course unless directed, as it encourages the growth of superbugs. Always consult your prescriber first.

## **Remember ...**

If you notice any change to your foot such as:

- Swelling
- Redness
- Increase in pain
- Increase in the amount of fluid coming from the ulcer
- If you develop hot or cold sweats or flu-like symptoms
- A sudden increase in blood sugar reading
- An unpleasant smell coming from the ulcer site

Contact your consultant, podiatrist, nurse or GP immediately as these symptoms may suggest that infection is present.

If you need any further advice, then please contact the Podiatry Service on the appropriate site:

**Fairfield General Hospital/Rochdale Infirmary - 0161 778 2860**

**Royal Oldham Hospital - 0161 627 8014**

**North Manchester General Hospital - 0161 720 2120**

This leaflet was produced by podiatry PAHT, based on the work of the North West Clinical Effectiveness Group 2007.

## **References**

For further information on the references used in this leaflet please go to <http://www.pat.nhs.uk/PortalVBVS/Default.aspx?tabindex=4&tabid=178>



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