

Venous ulcer

A venous ulcer is a wound or open sore between the ankle and knee. The skin around the ulcer is usually hard and a bluish-brown color and the ulcer may be wet.

How does a venous ulcer feel?

You usually don't have severe leg pain, but you might notice that your leg feels heavy or that pain gets worse when you stand. The pain will get better when you raise your leg.

Why did I get a venous ulcer?

Venous ulcers are caused when fluid builds up in your legs. This can happen if you have higher than normal pressure in your veins or your veins are weak.

You might have high pressure in your veins if you are:

- Overweight.
- Pregnant.
- Stand or sit for long periods of time.

The pressure stretches the walls and valves in your veins and damages them. The valves can't close tightly and fluid builds up in small veins by your feet. Fluid leaks out of these tiny blood vessels and makes your feet and legs swell.

People with a family history of varicose veins have weak veins. They're more likely to get venous ulcers. Venous ulcers can occur after a minor injury such as an insect bite or a bump on your leg, or in an area where the skin is rubbed by tight elastic in your socks.

How long will it take to heal?

The good news is that venous ulcers usually heal fairly quickly. Most people heal within several weeks to several months. Although some venous ulcers can last many years, proper care will help them heal faster.

How can I help it heal?

The quickest way to heal venous ulcers is to consistently apply pressure to your calf or leg with compression wraps or compression stockings. The pressure helps the fluid in your legs move back into your blood vessels. This helps the swelling in your legs and feet to go down. You and your doctor can work together to come up with a plan that works for you.

What else can I do to help my ulcer heal?

- Go for walks. Even short, 5-minute walks will help. Walking helps keep the blood circulating and speeds healing.
- Raise your legs for 10 to 15 minutes, 3 to 4 times a day. Put your feet up whenever you can; while on the phone, watching TV, even when eating meals if it's comfortable.
- Do ankle exercises while your feet are up. Whenever you sit or lie down, wiggle your feet and toes, move the top of your foot towards your leg and then away from it. You can also make circles with your foot and toes.
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet that includes fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein.

- If you have diabetes, work with your health care team to keep your blood sugar levels as close to normal as possible. It takes much longer for wounds to heal when blood sugar levels aren't under control.
- Avoid gaining weight. If you are overweight, lose weight slowly and steadily. You can call the Kaiser Permanente Resource Line at 1-800-992-2279 for information about losing weight.

Important things to know about your healing ulcer

- If you have a venous ulcer or an ulcer caused by a damaged vein, a compression wrap or bandage will help your leg heal. Other types of ulcers should **not** be treated with compression wraps or compression stockings.
- In most cases, antibiotics don't help heal venous ulcers.
- If you use tobacco, quit. Using tobacco damages blood vessels and slows healing of your ulcer. For information about quitting tobacco, call the Resource Line at 1-800-992-2279.

How can I prevent another ulcer?

- Continue to eat a healthy diet, and keep up with your exercise routine.
- Avoid injury. Move the furniture and rugs in your house so you will not bump into or trip over them.
- Avoid home treatments. They can irritate your skin. Only use skin lotions or creams that your doctor or nurse recommends.
- Move around often. On long car trips, stop every couple of hours to walk. On flights, stand up and stretch often.
- Raise your legs for 10 to 15 minutes 3 to 4 times a day, even when you don't have an ulcer.

Call your doctor or nurse right away if:

- You feel numbness, tingling, or aching pain in your leg or foot. Your compression wrap may be too tight. Unwrap or cut off the compression wrap right away.
- Your ulcer looks different all of a sudden.
- You find a new ulcer.
- If you have any of the following:
 - More tenderness or pain in the area of the wound.
 - Redness around the wound.
 - Swelling that gets worse.
 - Bad smell coming from the wound.
 - Pain that doesn't get better with pain medicine.
 - More drainage coming from the wound.
 - Fever with a temperature of 101°F or higher

After clinic hours, call the **Consulting Nurse Service: Call toll-free 1-800-297-6877**

Resources: Where can I get more information?

The **Kaiser Permanente Resource Line** can provide information on a variety of health topics.

Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. toll-free 1-800-992-2279.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on our website at kp.org/wa.