

AGEING WELL

FACTSHEETS

sia spinal
injuries
association
FOR LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY



CARING FOR YOUR SKIN

Skin

The Functions of the Skin

Skin acts to protect internal organs from disease, excrete waste products, regulate body temperature and provide sensation through nerve endings. Skin functioning is affected following spinal cord injury (SCI).

Risk Factors

The skin is a living organ and with age becomes thinner and loses its elasticity. Circulation becomes sluggish and this reduces the amount of nutrients feeding it. All of these factors make the skin more susceptible to breaking down.



In the Ageing Well Survey, 2007, skin care issues were among the top three health priorities identified by respondents.

Pressure Sores

Following SCI, skin is more susceptible to developing pressure sores and they continue to be one of the leading complications.

The European Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel defines a pressure sore as *'An area of localised damage to the skin and underlying tissue caused by pressure, shear, friction and / or a combination of these'*

Pressure sores are caused when the blood flowing to an area is interrupted. Sitting or lying in the same position for long periods will reduce blood supply to that area and start a pressure sore.

Having a pressure sore can result in weeks, even months in bed. If hospitalisation is required, this can create its own risks of secondary infection and in addition puts a strain on family members. Days off work are lost and social life interrupted. The affected area will be vulnerable to breaking down again. The human and financial costs of pressure sores are huge.

What can you do to help keep your skin healthy and intact?

- Don't smoke, this reduces oxygen and other essential nutrients getting to the skin. Smoking affects the arteries causing blood pressure to rise.

- Try to keep your weight within a healthy range. Excessive weight causes added pressure and should be avoided. Being too thin can also cause problems. As we age, we naturally lose muscle mass and this reduces essential protection. In other words, a 'little bit of padding' helps to avoid bony protrusions putting pressure on skin. Also your immune system could be weakened if you are underweight.
- Keep well hydrated, 6-8 cups of water per day is recommended. Ideal drinks are water, milk and juice. Try to limit your caffeine intake as this can cause you to lose body fluids by increasing urine output.
- Keep alcohol intake to within the recommended levels.
- Eat good quality food, including adequate protein for tissue repair. Include nutritious foods from all of the food groups:
- Keep your skin clean and dry – contact with urine and faeces is particularly damaging to the skin. When drying yourself, pat dry rather than rubbing the skin. Think about using a barrier cream to keep the skin moist.
- Keep your immune system healthy – even mental health issues such as depression can alter your immune response to infections.
- Use the correct equipment for your needs: ask your OT for a re-assessment if your needs have changed with time.
- Change/replace worn out equipment: keep up to date with new types of equipment and technology.
- Stay vigilant, if you've never had a pressure sore it doesn't follow that you never will.
- Take extra care of your skin during episodes of illness as your skin is at high risk during these times. E.g. Extra pillows are useful for support and protection when you are confined to bed.
- Avoid swelling (oedema) of the skin, and don't leave it untreated.
- Inform new carers exactly how you wish to be handled / treated.
- Use a hoist for transferring – ageing skin is less resistant to shearing forces.
- Check skin, using a mirror or get your carer to do this twice a day (in the morning before dressing and before bedtime).
- Know where the vulnerable pressure points are on your body. (See SIA's Pressure Care Management Fact Sheet).
- When in bed, change position every 2 hours
- When in a chair - move every 20 minutes or so by lifting or moving from side to side / forwards (in line with what is best for your level of injury).



Top Tip - You or your carer could keep a record of pressure sore history, including how long you had to stay on bed rest plus any other relevant information which may help if the sore should re-occur.

What to do if you think a pressure sore is forming?



Take action immediately!!

When you notice the first signs of a pressure sore, it's telling you damage is already happening. The only way for the sore to heal is to keep pressure off of it.

1. Start on bed rest and continue until the mark disappears. A cold compress can be applied (make sure you protect any cold objects with a towel before applying to the skin).
2. Try to find the cause of the pressure sore.
3. Call your District Nurse within 24-48 hours of first noticing the mark.

You can take a photograph of the sore and text or e mail it to your Spinal Cord Injury Centre Outpatient Department for advice (by prior arrangement).

When the affected area has healed, resume your normal activities slowly. The skin of scar tissue from old pressure sores is weaker and prone to breaking down again.

The condition of your skin reflects your overall health.

Summary

Maintain a healthy skin routine with good hygiene and care; be vigilant in checking your skin twice a day; maintain an ideal bodyweight; relieve pressure regularly; and eat and drink adequately. These are key lifestyle habits to adopt in preventing pressure sores. Remember, keeping skin healthy is a constant process.

Further Reading

SIA Fact Sheet entitled *Pressure Care Management* for further details.

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ABOUT SIA

The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) is the leading national user-led charity for spinal cord injured (SCI) people. Being user led, we are well placed to understand the everyday needs of living with spinal cord injury and are here to meet those needs by providing key services to share information and experiences, and to campaign for change ensuring each person can lead a full and active life. We are here to support you from the moment your spinal cord injury happens, and for the rest of your life.

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