

Venous Leg Ulcer

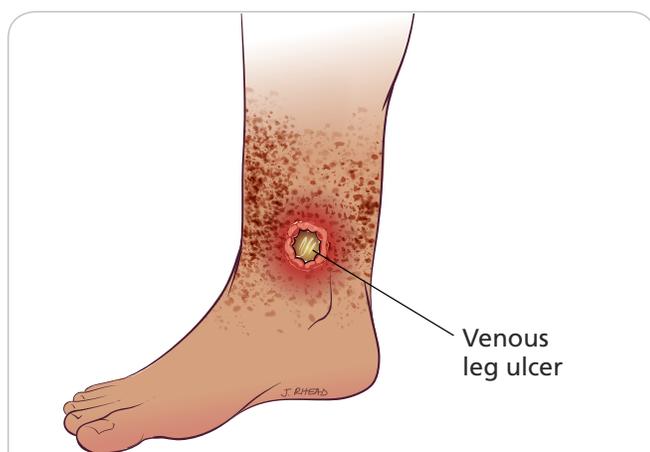
What is a venous leg ulcer and what causes it?

A **venous** [vee-nuhs] **leg ulcer**—also called a **venous stasis** [stay-sis] **ulcer**—is a wound that occurs when blood leaks into the skin from the veins, causing the skin to break down. This happens when the blood doesn't move through the veins toward the heart as it should.

Who is at risk for a venous leg ulcer?

Both men and women can get a venous leg ulcer. You may be more likely to develop a leg ulcer if you:

- Have had an injury to the leg
- Have had certain conditions such as varicose veins, a blood clot in the leg, or multiple pregnancies
- Are overweight
- Have a job that requires long periods of standing or sitting



Most venous leg ulcers develop on either side of the lower leg, just above the ankle.

What are the symptoms?

Early signs and symptoms of a developing venous leg ulcer include:

- A swollen leg
- A burning or itching sensation around the area
- Brownish-red and dry skin

Once the ulcer has developed:

- The wound is often wet or weeping, and may have a yellow-white film over it
- The skin around the wound is often discolored and swollen, and may feel warm

How can I help my leg ulcer heal?

If you have a leg ulcer, it can take a long time to heal. You can take these steps to help it heal faster:

- **Clean and cover your wound** as your doctor recommends. The skin around the wound must be protected from the fluid that drains from the wound. If not, the skin may break down and make the wound larger.
- **Use compression therapy** as recommended by your doctor. Compression stockings and other special leg bandages put pressure on the wound and surrounding skin. This helps your muscles push blood back up through the veins and reduce swelling in your lower leg.
- **Eat a healthy diet that includes lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and drink plenty of fluids.**
- **Exercise regularly**, as your doctor recommends.

How can I help prevent a venous leg ulcer from forming or returning?

Once your leg ulcer has healed, you still need to watch the area closely since leg ulcers often return. You can help prevent a leg ulcer from returning, or forming, by protecting your skin, living a healthy lifestyle, and maintaining good circulation.

Protection

Protect your skin by:

- **Checking and moisturizing it daily.**
 - Avoid creams with perfumes, aloe, and lanolin.
 - Do not use harsh or highly perfumed soaps.
 - Do not use adhesive tape on your skin.
- **Not exposing it to extreme temperatures,** like sitting close to a fire.
- **Avoiding injuries.**

Healthy lifestyle

Live a healthy lifestyle by:

- **Exercising regularly.**
 - Walking is the best way to help the muscles in your lower leg work to push the blood back toward your heart.
 - If you are unable to walk, do ankle exercises while at rest. One example is to move your ankle and foot in a circular motion, first in one direction and then in the other. Rocking in a rocking chair while the feet rest on the ground can also cause your ankles to move and help keep the blood circulating.
- **Eating a healthy and balanced diet and maintaining a healthy weight.** Being overweight will put extra strain on your veins. It's also important to drink enough fluids. Your doctor can tell you how much you should be drinking.
- **Not smoking.** If you smoke, quit. If you can't quit, cut back as much as possible. Smoking is bad for blood circulation and healing.

Maintain good circulation

To maintain good circulation:

- **Wear well-fitted compression stockings.** This is especially important anytime your legs are below the level of your heart. Since support stockings gradually stretch out, replace them every 3 to 6 months to maintain the proper level of compression (pressure).
- **Check your position.**
 - Elevate your legs whenever you can. If you are in bed or lying on a couch, raise your feet so they're higher than the level of your heart. Support your legs and feet with pillows.
 - Do not cross your legs.
 - If you are standing for long periods of time (at work, for example), repeatedly shift your weight from one foot to the other, or stand up on tiptoes and then lower back down again.
- **Don't wear tight clothing or shoes.** Other than compression stockings, do not wear clothing that may restrict blood flow, such as garters, girdles, or knee-high socks. Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes that have room for stockings and bandages.

When should I call my doctor?

Contact your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms of poor circulation:

- Pain during physical activity or prolonged standing
- Throbbing, tenderness, or aching pain made worse by standing or movement
- Waxy whiteness of the affected leg
- Chest pain or shortness of breath
- Abdominal pain
- Decreased urine output
- Tingling, numbness, weakness, or paralysis
- Visual problems
- Swelling

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