Venous Leg Ulcer

What is a venous leg ulcer?
A venous leg ulcer (also called a venous stasis ulcer) is a wound that occurs when the veins don’t move blood back toward the heart as they should. Blood leaks from the veins into the skin tissue and causes the tissue to break down.

Leg ulcers can take a long time to heal and they often recur. Fortunately, there are things you can do at home to help treat a leg ulcer and to help prevent it from coming back once it’s healed.

What causes venous leg ulcers and who is at risk?
Venous leg ulcers occur in both men and women. You may be more likely to develop a leg ulcer if you have had an injury to the leg, certain conditions such as varicose veins, a blood clot in the leg, or multiple pregnancies. Risk factors also include being overweight or having a job that requires long periods of standing or sitting.

What are the symptoms?
The first signs that you are developing a venous leg ulcer are:
• The leg is swollen.
• The area has a burning or itching sensation.
• The skin is brownish-red and dry.

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 ulcer heal?
If you have a leg ulcer, you can take these steps to help it heal:
• Clean and dress 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.
• Follow your doctor’s recommendations for compression therapy. Your doctor may recommend that you wear compression stockings or use special leg bandages that apply pressure to the wound and surrounding skin. These help your muscles push blood back up through the veins and reduce swelling in your lower leg.
• Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids.
• Exercise regularly, as your doctor recommends.
How can I help prevent my leg ulcer from returning?

Once your leg ulcer has healed, you still need to watch the area closely. Take these steps to help keep your leg ulcer from returning:

• Check your skin and moisturize daily.
• Keep wearing your compression stockings. Since support stockings gradually stretch out, replace them every 3 to 6 months to maintain the proper level of compression.
• Be careful to not injure your legs.
• Do not sit close to a fire, and don’t expose your skin to extreme temperatures.

What else can I do to prevent leg ulcers?

There are a number of small steps you can take every day to help you prevent ulcers from developing, getting worse, or returning:

• **Exercise regularly.** Walking is the best exercise to help the calf muscles as they work to push the blood back toward your heart.

• If you are unable to walk, do ankle exercises while at rest. One exercise is to move the 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.

• **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.

• **Eat a healthy balanced diet** and maintain 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.

• **If you smoke, quit.** If you can’t quit, cut back as much as possible. Smoking is bad for blood circulation and healing.

• **Wear well-fitted elastic compression stockings,** anytime your legs are below the level of your heart.

• **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.

• **Take care of your skin.**
  – Use moisturizing cream on your skin. Avoid creams with perfumes, aloe, and lanolin.
  – Do not use harsh or highly perfumed soaps, as they may be hard on your skin.
  – Do not use adhesive tape on your skin.

When should I call a doctor?

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

• Pain with 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 or weakness
• Visual problems
• Swelling
• Paralysis