



Southport and  
Ormskirk Hospital  
NHS Trust

# **PATIENT INFORMATION**

# **Skin Management**

North West Regional Spinal Injuries  
Centre

# **SKIN MANAGEMENT AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY**

## **WHY DO WE HAVE SKIN?**

Your skin is a very important part of your body. It is the largest organ of the body, measuring approximately 1200 square cms.

## **WHAT DOES YOUR SKIN DO?**

*Your skin has 5 main functions:*

1. Helps you to maintain body heat.
2. Contains nerve cells for sensation (touch).
3. Helps get rid of waste products from your body.
4. Protects you from infection.
5. Makes vitamin D.

If your skin becomes damaged it never regains its original strength, even after healing, so it is much better to prevent damage occurring.

Caring for your skin is your responsibility, after all it does belong to you!

However, whilst you are in hospital it is our job to show you how to care for your skin and assist you to do this.

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR SKIN AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY?**

Since your spinal cord injury/damage occurred, some areas of your skin may *no longer feel sensation properly* and you are probably now *unable to walk and move about* as you did before.

This may mean you spend a great deal of time sitting in a wheelchair. This means that all your body weight is being transferred onto one area.

### ***Your Buttocks !***

If you cannot feel when you are uncomfortable, you will not move about to relieve the discomfort.

Your spinal cord injury can cause problems with the communication between your heart and body. Often this means your *pulse may be slower*, and your *blood pressure lower* than before your injury.

Along with a loss of muscle tone in your legs which normally helps pump blood back to your heart, this results in a slightly sluggish circulation and less oxygen and nutrients are able to reach the skin.

### **WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU DO NOT LOOK AFTER YOUR SKIN?**

If you do not look after your skin and you leave an area of your skin with too much pressure on it for too long a period of time, you will develop a *Pressure Sore*.

A pressure sore is an area of damaged skin, and is caused mainly by lying or sitting in the same position for too long without moving.

The constant pressure squeezes the blood out of the skin and deprives the cells of food and oxygen. The cells then die and create an ulcer or crater in the skin.

## **CAN ANYTHING ELSE CAUSE PRESSURE SORES?**

*The answer to this is Yes.*

A pressure sore usually occurs from lying in bed or sitting in a chair but there are other causes:

- Tight fitting clothes.
- Objects such as keys or coins in pockets or dropped in a shoe at night.
- Creases in bed sheets can all cause pressure sores so beware!

## **WHAT DOES A PRESSURE SORE LOOK LIKE?**

A sore usually starts off as an area of redness and warmth. This often looks harmless but this can rapidly deteriorate in to a nasty sore.

Happily, the damage is completely reversible at this stage which is why we insist on bed rest and keeping affected area pressure free.

***Do not ignore red marks!***  
***Position yourself so they are pressure free!***

*Always consider what has caused the red mark to occur and attempt to remove the cause to prevent it happening again.*

A *bursa* is a deep area of inflammation next to a bone. It will feel like a hard lump or cyst over a bony area. It may feel hot. In some cases a red mark appears on the skin but not in all. It is therefore essential you or someone else feels your pressure areas to ensure early detection of a bursa.

A good method is to lie on your back with your legs straight and feel buttocks, ischiums and hips at the same time. Differences are then more easily detectable. Washing your hands in cold water first makes them more susceptible to feeling any hot spots.

**Treat it exactly as you would a red mark and stay off!**

## **WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DO NOT STAY OFF A RED MARK?**

A pressure sore is a very debilitating and depressing injury that can take months or even years to heal, resulting in a long period of enforced bed rest. If they become very deep they can destroy bone and cause life threatening infection.

***Pressure sores can kill in serious cases!***

**THE MORAL OF THIS STORY IS  
LOOK AFTER YOUR SKIN**

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT SORES FROM HAPPENING?**

- ***Relieve the pressure***

Perform regular pressure lifts in your chair if you can i.e. every hour. If you cannot do this the nurse or OT will advise you of other methods of relieving pressure.

- ***Be aware of your turning regime in bed***

While you are in hospital you will be taught how to build up your skin tolerance gradually increasing the time between turns.

- ***Become familiar with your skin***

If you can, inspect your skin with a hand mirror before you get up in the morning and when you return to bed. You will then be able to detect a red mark and keep off it before it becomes a pressure sore.

If you are not able to inspect your own skin, get your carer or nurse to check it for you.

- ***Take extra care when turning or transferring***

This can be a problem when transferring from your chair onto the toilet or into a car etc. An injury or damage to skin can quickly become a sore.

- ***Eat a balanced Healthy diet***

This is essential to keep your skin in good condition and for healing. It also ensures that you have enough padding to sit on!

- ***Pay particular attention to hygiene***

Clean skin is healthy skin. Avoid using talcum powder as this can absorb, the natural oils in your skin leaving it dry.

- ***Always ensure good foot care***

See a chiropodist if necessary. Pooling of your circulation can cause your feet to swell and tight shoes can lead to pressure sores. *It is advised that you wear a size bigger shoe than you previously did.*

## **CONTROLLING YOUR BODY TEMPERATURE**

Your skin plays a major role in maintaining your body temperature. If you are too hot you will produce more sweat, blood will be redirected to the surface of your skin which gives you a flushed appearance, your pulse rate will increase to ensure the cooled blood is quickly circulated to cool down your internal organs all this encourages heat loss to maintain an ideal body temperature.

In contrast if you are cold you will find your hairs will stand on end to trap warm air next to your skin. You will shiver as movement produces heat. You will become pale as your blood is redirected away from your skin surface to warm your internal organs.

If you become too cold your pulse may slow to a dangerous level which can result in loss of consciousness or even death from hypothermia.

Following spinal cord injury these natural occurring defence mechanisms may be compromised or even non existent below your level of injury. It is therefore essential that you put in other forms of temperature control.

### **IN COLD WEATHER**

Ensure that you wear thermal underwear, also wear layers of clothing that may be added or removed easily as you move from indoors to outside.

Wear a hat and gloves to keep warm and prevent frostbite in your fingers.

If you suspect you are cold or find it difficult to stay awake in

cold weather check your temperature and pulse. It should be above 36°c for your temp or 45 beats per minute for your pulse.

If they are lower than these limits you need to take action to warm up. Wrap up warmly, put on a hat, drink hot fluids.

Do not apply a heat source directly to your skin as you may burn.

### **IN WARM WEATHER**

Ensure you apply a high factor sun cream to all exposed areas. Avoid sitting in direct sunlight.

Wear loose fitting lightweight clothing. Use a spray to simulate sweating and help you to lose body heat. Use a hand fan.

Drink plenty of cool fluids. Signs that you are over heating include headaches, racing pulse rate, increased respirations and confusion.

If this occurs you should take steps to cool down and seek medical advice.

If you would like to discuss any issues raised within this leaflet please contact a member of the nursing staff:

**Nurse in Charge  
Ward Office  
(01704) 704346**

**Spinal Outpatient Department  
(01704) 704354**



## **Other Sources of Information:**

[www.spinalnet.co.uk](http://www.spinalnet.co.uk)

Moving Forward Manual Spinal Injuries Association

**During your contact with us, it is important that you are happy with your care and treatment. Please speak to a member of staff and/or the ward/department Sister/Charge Nurse if you have any questions or concerns.**

## **MATRON**

A Matron is also available during the hours of 9.00 to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday. During these periods, ward/department staff can contact Matron to arrange to meet with you. Out of hours, a Senior Nurse can be contacted via the ward/department to deal with any concerns you may have.

## **INFECTION CONTROL REQUEST**

Preventing infections is a crucial part of our patients' care. To ensure that our standards remain high our staff have regular infection prevention and control training and their practice is monitored in the workplace. We ask patients and visitors to assist us in preventing infections by cleaning their hands at regular intervals and informing staff of areas within the hospital that appear soiled.

As a patient there may be times that you are unsure whether a staff member has cleaned their hands; if in doubt please ask the staff member and they will be only too happy to put your mind at ease by cleaning their hands so that you can see them.

## **SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS**

### **ANY CONDITION SPECIFIC DANGER SIGNALS TO LOOK OUT FOR:**

### **CONTACT INFORMATION IF YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT YOUR CONDITION**

Your own GP –

### **OTHER USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS/CONTACTS:**

NHS 111

Stop Smoking Helpline (Sefton) - 0300 100 1000

Stop Smoking Helpline (West Lancashire) - 0800 328 6297

**Please call 01704 704714 if you need  
this leaflet in an alternative format**

**Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust**

Ormskirk & District General Hospital  
Wigan Road, Ormskirk, L39 2AZ  
Tel: (01695) 577111

Southport & Formby District General Hospital  
Town Lane, Kew, Southport, PR8 6PN  
Tel: (01704) 547471

**FOR APPOINTMENTS**

Telephone (01695) 656680  
Email [soh-tr.appointments@nhs.net](mailto:soh-tr.appointments@nhs.net)

Please remember to complete the **attached** *Friends and Family Test*.

Alternatively, you can complete the *Friends and Family Test* on-line by going to: [southportandormskirk.nhs.uk/FFT](http://southportandormskirk.nhs.uk/FFT)

**Thank you**

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