

# Protect your skin

An ounce of prevention  
is worth a pound of cure



## About the skin

The skin is the largest and most important organ of the body.

The skin protects the body from the environment and infections. This is why it's very important to keep the skin intact and healthy.

## What is a pressure ulcer?

A pressure ulcer is damage to the skin caused by constant pressure over a certain period of time.

A pressure ulcer can form in just a few hours. It usually begins with discoloration of the skin. An area becomes slightly redder or darker than usual and does not disappear when pressure is removed. Pressure ulcers are sometimes called bedsores.

## When is there a risk of developing a pressure ulcer?

You are at risk if:

- You're bedridden (you're confined to bed);
- You have trouble changing position;
- You spend a lot of time sitting in a chair or wheelchair;
- You don't feel discomfort due to reduced sensitivity to pressure (e.g. you had a stroke);
- You're seriously ill;
- You're elderly and weak;
- You have poor circulation;
- Your skin is in contact with dampness (e.g. sweat or urine);
- You don't eat well or don't drink enough fluid.





## Check your skin

Check your skin every day at pressure points (see page 2) and ask for help as needed.

If you notice any of the following signs at a support or pressure point, tell your caregiver or doctor:

- Redness if you are light-skinned; purple or bluish discoloration if you are dark-skinned;
- Swelling, especially on bony areas;
- Blisters;
- Areas of dry or hardened skin;
- Cracks, calluses or chapped skin;
- Pain at pressure points.

## Where do pressure ulcers form?

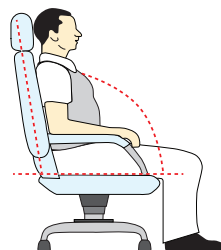
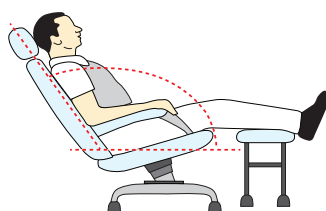
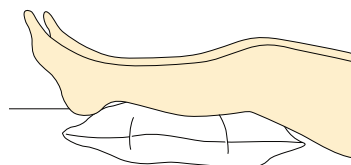
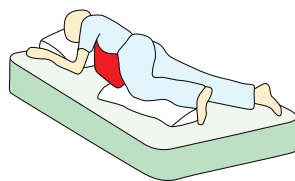
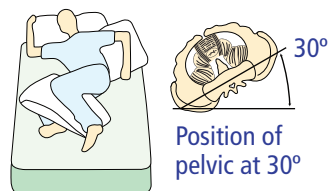
Pressure ulcers form where bones are near the skin (e.g. on the hips, ankles, heels and elbows).

The following support (or pressure) points are those most frequently affected:

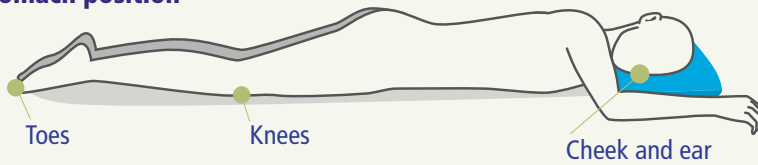
- |                     |                                      |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • Back of the head; | • Hips;                              |
| • Shoulder blades;  | • Area between the knees and ankles; |
| • Lower back;       | • Tailbone;                          |
| • Elbows;           | • Heels;                             |
| • Ears;             | • Buttocks.                          |
| • Shoulders;        |                                      |

## Measures to prevent pressure ulcers

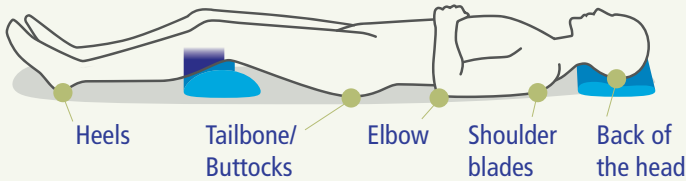
- When you're sitting on a chair, change position often (use your arms to lift your buttocks off the chair, lean forward or sideways). Repeat this exercise for a few seconds every 15 minutes to relieve the pressure.
- Use cushions to relieve the pressure on the skin. However, avoid using doughnut-type cushions because these can reduce blood flow to the skin.
- When in bed, turn every two hours (ask for help if you need it).
- Install an overlay foam mattress that is at least 7 to 10 cm (3 to 4 inches) thick.
- Use triangular cushions or foam pillows to support your position and separate your knees and ankles.
- Place pillows under your legs to keep your heels off the mattress and support your knees.
- Avoid sliding your body when transferring from a chair to bed or vice versa or moving up the bed.
- Keep the foot of the bed raised when sitting in bed so you don't slide down, which could injure your heels or buttocks; don't stay in this position for more than 30 minutes.
- Maintain good posture when sitting and always use the special cushion chosen by your occupational therapist.



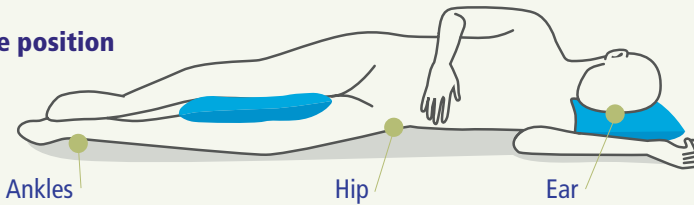
### Stomach position



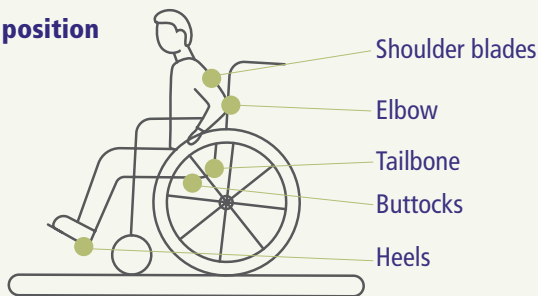
### Back position



### Side position



### Sitting position



- Avoid sliding your heels or elbows on the sheets.
- Don't rub the skin covering bony areas.
- Use moisturizer on dry skin.
- Follow a regular schedule for urinary and intestinal care. Urine or stool coming in contact with the skin increases the risk of ulcers.

- Use a mild soap, water and soft washcloth to clean the skin.
- Be aware that pressure ulcers can sometimes develop even if you have followed all the advice.
- Pressure ulcers can be treated and healed by following the directions of your health care team.

## Nutrition

It's important to eat a balanced diet based on Canada's Food Guide.

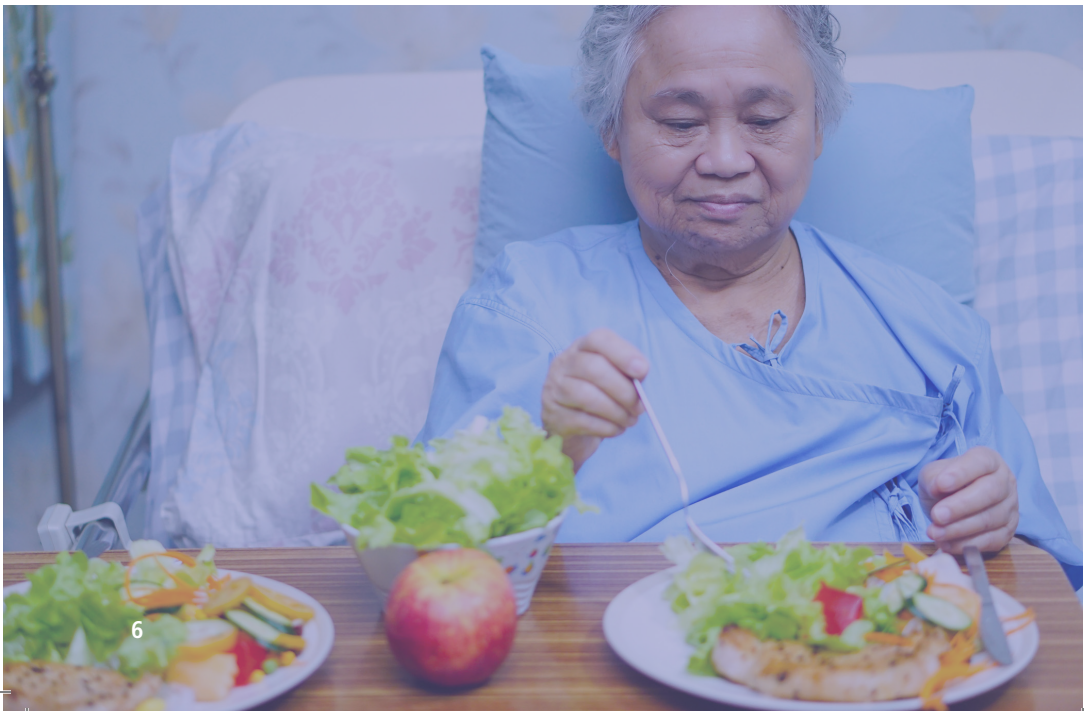
If you're not eating well, you may need to take a food supplement (e.g. Ensure).

Follow your dietitian's advice.

Your doctor or dietitian could suggest a protein, vitamin or mineral supplement.

## Fluid intake

Drink lots of fluid. Unless your doctor tells you otherwise, it is recommended that adults drink 1,500 to 2,000 mL (6 to 8 glasses) of fluid per day.





## References

*Ayello E, Braden B. How and Why to Do Pressure Ulcer Risk Assessment.* Advances in Skin & Wound Care, 2002; 15(3):125-133.

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**Clinical Practice Guidelines, Pressure ulcer risk assessment and prevention.** Royal College of Nursing, 2003; 17-19

**European Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel and National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel.** Prevention and Treatment of Pressure Ulcers: Quick Reference Guide. Washington DC: National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel; 2014.

**Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (2005).** Risk Assessment and Prevention of Pressure Ulcers. (Revised 2010). Toronto, Canada: Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario.

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