

Foot Ulcers - A Guide for Patients and Carers

What is a foot ulcer?

An ulcer is a medical term for an open sore. Foot ulcers can take weeks or months to heal.

Sometimes the open sore can get worse and become infected. If it is very serious, it can lead to an amputation.

What causes foot ulcers?

- Footwear that does not fit well
- Injury
- Walking barefoot
- Poor foot hygiene
- Dry skin

Foot deformity, poor blood supply or nerve damage to the feet can increase the risk of foot ulcers

How are foot ulcers treated?

After checking the condition of your feet, the podiatrist or nurse will plan a treatment together with you. This will include:

1. Regular dressing of your ulcer

Your podiatrist or nurse will let you know which is best for you.

2. Debridement when needed.

Debridement is the removal of hard skin, dead or infected tissue. Debridement is usually not painful.

Benefits of debridement:

- It shows up the full size of the ulcer.
- It reduces pressure on the corners of the ulcer.
- It reduces the risk of infection.

After debridement, the ulcer may look bigger or may bleed, but it will be a cleaner ulcer. The quickest way to debride ulcers is with a scalpel blade. If this cannot be done, a suitable dressing may be applied to encourage the ulcer to debride itself.

3. Pressure relief

This is an important part of your treatment plan. Any pressure placed on your ulcer either from footwear or walking will slow down the healing. There are many ways of taking pressure off your ulcer. You can decide together with your podiatrist which would be best for you.

Will I need special tests?

Sometimes tests may be needed. These may include:

- A swab from the ulcer to find out which bacteria may be causing the infection.
- Circulation tests on your legs and feet
- Blood tests
- X-ray to find out if the infection is in the bone.

Do I need to take antibiotics?

You will need to take antibiotics if your ulcer is infected.

How long do I need to take antibiotics for?

You may need to take antibiotics for seven days to a few months, depending on how serious the infection is. You need to take your antibiotics regularly and complete the whole course.

DO'S AND DONT'S

Do reduce walking on the foot with an ulcer as much as possible

Do keep your blood glucose levels well controlled if you have diabetes. This is very important to help healing take place.

Do give up smoking – ask your doctor or nurse for advice.

Do keep your dressing dry and change it regularly as instructed.

Do use properly fitted footwear and offloading as instructed by your podiatrist.

Don't stop taking antibiotics as it encourages the growth of super bugs, unless you are told to do so. Always ask your doctor first before you stop.

Remember ...

You may have an infection if you have the following changes:

- Swelling
- Redness
- Increase in pain
- Increase in fluids or foul smell coming out from the ulcer
- Hot or cold sweats, fever or flu-like symptoms

Please see a doctor immediately.