

# Patient Information for Ischemic ulcer - Skin

## Overview

An ischemic ulcer, also known as an arterial ulcer, is an open sore in the skin that starts because the blood vessels bringing blood to the skin (arteries) are not working properly. Ischemic ulcers usually appear on the lower legs. Normally, the blood vessels bring blood to all parts of the body, but due to a condition called atherosclerosis (the buildup of fatty deposits in the artery walls), blood to the legs and feet is decreased. These ulcers usually develop slowly over years and can be painful.

Treatment of these ulcers can reduce the pain, help the wound heal, lower the chances of having the foot amputated, and improve behaviors and risk factors that may be causing decreased blood flow.

## Who's At Risk

There are certain people who have a greater chance of getting ischemic ulcers. They include people with the following risk factors:

- Diabetes
- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Male
- Elderly
- Inactive lifestyle (no exercise, sitting too much)

## Signs & Symptoms

Ischemic ulcers often occur on the feet and ankles or in between the toes. They are rarely found on the arms and hands. They usually look like "punched-out" sores in the skin with a pale base.

The ulcers and the surrounding skin may look blue or pale, feel cool to the touch, and have loss of hair around the ulcer. Toe nails may also appear thick.

Since these ulcers are also associated with poor circulation (a condition called peripheral artery disease), people often experience pain in the legs while walking that gets better when they rest. This condition is called claudication, and you should tell your doctor if you experience these

symptoms.

## **Self-Care Guidelines**

To help treat your ischemic ulcer or at least prevent it from getting worse, you can:

- Exercise. It has been shown that regular exercise can improve symptoms.
- If you struggle with diabetes, high blood pressure, and/or high cholesterol, these conditions need to be kept under control with guidance from your doctor.
- Quit smoking.
- Keep the surrounding skin in good condition by using moisturizers.
- If there is an open ulcer, apply petroleum jelly or another similar ointment to keep the ulcer from drying out. Keep the ulcer covered with a clean bandage at all times. Hydrocolloid dressings can be helpful and can be purchased at a pharmacy or medical supply store.

## **When to Seek Medical Care**

Even if you are already seeking medical attention for the risk factors and conditions listed above, ask your doctor to evaluate these sores. Otherwise, seek medical care when you notice any non-healing sores on your feet or soles.

When your doctor evaluates you, he or she may order some additional tests.

- A test to determine how much blood is flowing through your arteries – This involves taking your blood pressure on each arm and ankle. Your doctor may also use an ultrasound machine during this process. This test is not painful.
- Blood tests to determine your blood sugar and cholesterol status.

Other tests that may be ordered:

- Imaging tests to see what your arteries look like.
- Skin biopsy to determine if the ulcer is cancerous or not.

## **Treatments Your Physician May Prescribe**

Along with recommending exercise and assisting you with your other medical conditions, your doctor may also prescribe some medications and treatments. These treatments may include:

- Antibiotics (either pills or topical creams) if there is an infection present.
- Thorough foot care, including cleaning the ulcer and placing cream or gel on it to help with healing.
- Oral medication to control pain.
- Special types of bandages.

If your condition is severe and the treatments prescribed are not helping, doctors may recommend surgery to help increase blood flow to the legs. If this is recommended, the doctor or surgeon will discuss the risks and benefits of the surgery with you.