

Soaring cost of treating patients with bedsores

Pressure ulcers can be uncomfortable at best and life-threatening at worst. Here, **Georgina Passmore**, an advanced paramedic practitioner for the Welsh Ambulance Service, gives her expert advice on how they can be avoided...

Pressure ulcers are painful, distressing and can have a dramatic effect on a person's life.

Pressure damage can occur quickly, sometimes within hours, depending on the individual's risk factors.

It is therefore important that preventive actions start as soon as possible.

In Wales, pressure ulcers affected 8.9% of all in hospital patients (Clark, Semple, Irwins et al, 2017), and the cost of pressure ulcers is significant both to the patient and to the health service.

Pressure ulcers can be painful, decrease quality of life and increase hospital stays. In some cases, pressure ulcers can contribute to death, caused by infections of the ulcers leading to septicaemia.

In the UK Dealey et al. (2012) reported that the cost of treating a single pressure ulcer is £1,214 and this cost rises with the severity of the ulcer up to £14,108.

What are pressure ulcers?

Pressure ulcers can affect any area of the body where bones are close to the skin such as the back of the head, shoulder blades, tailbone and heels.

The skin around these bony areas are prone to injury if pressure is applied for a period of time.

Pressure ulcers can develop when a person cannot move or reposition themselves regularly.

How do they occur?

Pressure ulcers are more commonly

known as pressure sores or bedsores.

Pressure on these areas can squash the small blood vessels leading to a reduction in blood flow to the skin.

The lack of blood flow means oxygen and nutrients cannot reach the area and waste cannot be removed.

If the pressure is not removed, all these factors can cause the skin to break down and a wound to develop.

Pressure ulcers usually affect people who are bed bound or who sit in a chair for long periods of time.

This may be due to an acute injury such as a fall or long-term conditions such as paralysis.

At-risk groups include:

- patients who have problems moving or changing position without help;
- who cannot feel pain over part or all of their body;
- who are seriously ill;
- have had a pressure ulcer before;
- have a poor diet and don't drink enough water;
- have problems with memory and understanding (such as with dementia)
- have an injury which affects how they move.

However it is important to note that not all pressure ulcers are avoidable. Pressure ulcers can develop despite appropriate interventions by healthcare providers.

How can they be prevented?

Pressure ulcer formation can depend on the intensity and duration of



➤ Patients who have problems moving without help are prone to pressure ulcers

pressure.

On a day-to-day basis, reducing the risk of pressure depends on the level of mobility of the individual.

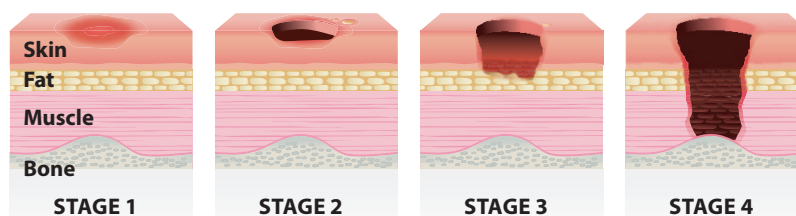
The main aim is to move or change position frequently. It's important to identify people who may be at risk and to know the early signs of a pressure ulcer.

The skin in a vulnerable area i.e. buttocks may become discoloured – this usually appears red on pale skin and blue/purple on darker skin.

The area may feel warm, spongy or hard and may also be painful. If the area of discolouration doesn't turn white when pressed it may be a sign of a pressure ulcer.

More serious signs including blistering of the skin or a deep wound.

Once a pressure ulcer develops conditions such as diabetes, peripheral arterial disease, heart and lung



disease can have an effect on the skin's ability to heal.

If you have reduced mobility and have any signs of a pressure ulcer you should contact your healthcare team as soon as possible.

Ambulance services can play an important role in recognition, prevention and referral of individuals who are at risk from pressure ulcers.

As part of the Welsh Ambulance Service's falls framework, we have collaborated with Hywel Dda tissue viability experts, Welsh Wound Inno-

vation Centre and www.onclick.co.uk to develop an eLearning package for ambulance service staff to raise awareness of this important issue.

The aim of this eLearning package is to improve the care we deliver to our service users by raising awareness about pressure ulcer prevention among ambulance personnel.

International Stop Pressure Ulcer Day takes place once a year. Its aim is to raise awareness of pressure ulcers among organisations, healthcare professionals and the general public.

Over the past two years we have joined organisations around the world in promoting this condition.

If you would like more information on this condition you can visit www.wwic.wales.

In March 2019 we were delighted to be awarded second place in Journal of Wound Care Awards – The Professional Education Award.

This was a significant accolade for us to be recognised among the international wound care community.

This work also received the Welsh Ambulance Service Learning and Innovation Award in October.

We have presented at several conferences including College of Paramedic Conference, Tissue Viability Conference and Wales Chief Nursing Officer Conference in 2019.

We continue to develop our work on this topic and look forward to working with our colleagues in the NHS to prevent pressure ulcers.



➤ Advice on how pressure ulcers can be avoided

