Leg ulcers can be painful, and sometimes take a long time to heal. But treatments can help, and almost all ulcers get better eventually. We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

What are leg ulcers?

A leg ulcer is a sore on your lower leg that won't heal. Leg ulcers sometimes start after a knock or bump breaks the skin on your lower leg. A wound can turn into a leg ulcer if it doesn't heal. This can happen if the blood flow to your legs isn't good enough.

This information is for people who have a condition that doctors call venous leg ulcers. It doesn't look at how well these treatments work for people who have diabetes and get diabetic foot ulcers.

What are the symptoms?

Leg ulcers are shallow, moist wounds. They're often red or yellowish. They can be any size, and some even stretch all the way around the leg. They get smaller as they heal.

If you get rough, bumpy tissue in your ulcer, it's usually good news. It shows your ulcer is healing.

What treatments work?

There are treatments that can help prevent ulcers, and others to help them heal. There are also things you can do yourself to reduce your chance of getting an ulcer.

Things you can do yourself

If you're at risk of leg ulcers, doctors often recommend that you put your feet up whenever you sit down. It's also a good idea to raise the foot of your bed slightly. You should keep active when you're not resting and eat a balanced diet. It's best to give up smoking if you smoke and lose weight if you're overweight. Be careful not to bump or knock your legs. You might break the skin and get another ulcer.

If you get pain from your ulcer, simple painkillers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen may help.

Treatments to prevent leg ulcers

If you've had an ulcer, wearing compression stockings will help to stop you getting another. You'll need to wear them all the time. One study found that 2 in 10 people who wore stockings got another ulcer, compared with 5 in 10 who didn't wear stockings.
If you have varicose veins, surgery to remove them can help prevent leg ulcers. In one study, 1 in 10 people who had surgery got another ulcer within a year. This compared with 3 in 10 people who didn't have surgery. Having varicose veins removed is quite a common operation. But there are risks with any sort of surgery, such as an infection or bleeding.

There's a chance that surgery to get rid of varicose veins could help an ulcer heal. But doctors don't usually like to do the operation while you have an ulcer. They'll probably recommend that you wait till it has healed.

**Treatments to help leg ulcers heal**

**Tight bandages** around your lower leg can help your ulcer to heal. They'll normally be changed once a week by a nurse. Bandages are sometimes treated with a chemical that kills bacteria.

It's important that bandages are put on properly. If they're too tight, they could cut off the blood supply to your leg. If your toes change colour, your bandages may be too tight. You may not be able to wear bandages if you have rheumatoid arthritis or poor blood flow to your legs. Occasionally bandages can hurt or make your skin itch. If you're having problems, talk to your nurse.

Inflatable boots or leggings are sometimes used on top of or instead of bandages. They're less convenient though, because they stop you moving around easily.

If bandages don't work, a drug called pentoxifylline (brand name Trental) can help your ulcer to heal. You'll need to keep wearing the bandages too.

You take pentoxifylline as tablets. In the research, about two-thirds of the people who took pentoxifylline and wore bandages had healed within six months. Less than half the people who just had bandages had healed. But there are some side effects. In one study, about 1 in 10 people said pentoxifylline made them feel sick, or gave them diarrhoea or indigestion.

It's important to keep your ulcer clean. Warm tap water is usually enough to remove any pus or dead tissue. But sometimes doctors and nurses use other treatments. They may gently scrape away the dead tissue with a scalpel, or use a chemical to wash it away. It may sound surprising, but sterile maggots that eat dead skin can also be used. If you get a lot of pus, doctors sometimes use a suction pump to get rid of it. There hasn't been enough research to say how much these things help.

If you have a big ulcer that won't heal, your doctor may suggest you have a skin graft. Doctors take the skin from a healthy part of your leg, probably your thigh. You'll need to carry on wearing compression bandages afterwards.

Newer treatments for leg ulcers include artificial skin that's used instead of a dressing, chemicals to help your skin grow, and ultrasound or laser treatment. But these aren't used very often.
Leg ulcers

What will happen to me?

Your ulcer will almost certainly heal eventually. If treatment goes well, your ulcer should heal in less than three months. But it sometimes takes much longer. About 4 in 5 ulcers need up to a year to heal.

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