

This leaflet is written for patients by patients and is based on experience and medical information.

I have a leg ulcer. Why am I being referred to a vascular clinic?

What is a leg ulcer?

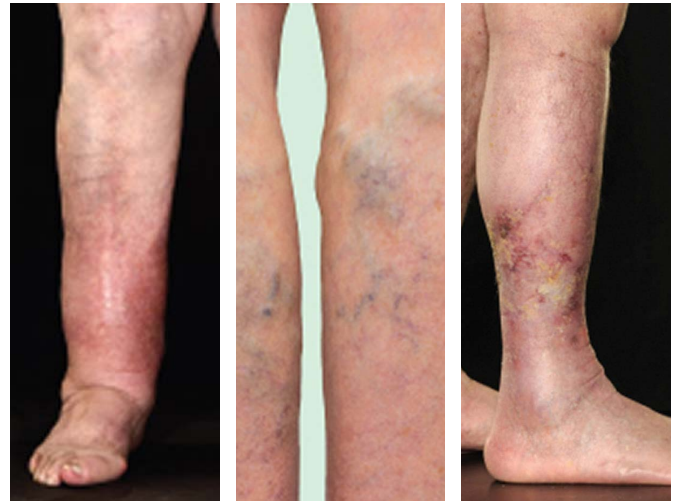
Leg ulcers are wounds which most commonly occur between the knee and the ankle, and which haven't healed for more than two weeks. They are sometimes the result of injuries which fail to heal, and other times appear because of a problem with the blood flow in your legs. They can be extremely painful and unpleasant.

What is a Vascular Clinic?

A vascular clinic diagnoses and manages problems with your veins and arteries. Problems with veins and arteries account for around 90% of leg ulcers. Treatment will depend on the cause of your leg ulcer, so it is very important to have the right tests to determine the cause.

You **may** be referred to a vascular clinic if you already have a leg ulcer, or if you have one (or more) of the following symptoms, which may result in you getting an ulcer if not investigated:

- If your legs are swollen.
- If you have aching or a feeling of heaviness in your legs.
- If you have itching or a change of colour of your skin on your legs (such as red or brown staining on your ankle).
- If you have varicose veins (bulging veins under the surface of your skin).



What is the difference between a venous leg ulcer and an arterial leg ulcer?

Both types of ulcer may look the same to you as a patient or carer, but it is important to know which type of ulcer you have to ensure you get the right treatment.

A venous leg ulcer is an open sore in the skin of the lower leg due to high pressure of the blood in the leg veins (venous hypertension) which results from something called chronic venous insufficiency.

Arterial leg ulcers are caused by arteries not working properly. Arteries carry blood from your heart to your legs in order to keep them healthy. Arterial disease accounts for about 15% of leg ulcers.

What may happen at your appointment?

- You will see a vascular healthcare professional.
- Your medical history will be taken, and your legs will be examined.
- Your wound will be cleaned and measured.
- Photographs may be taken to monitor the progress of the wound healing.
- You may have one or more tests to help determine the cause/s of your leg ulcer – two of which are explained below.
- Your wound will then be covered with an appropriate dressing.
- A plan of care will be prepared with you and your carers. Most ulcers are caused by problems with your veins (venous insufficiency) and may be managed in the community. The most common treatment is compression. Patients with arterial ulcers may require specialist intervention.
- You may be asked if you would like to participate in the care of your leg ulcer. Many people find they can manage cleaning and dressing their own ulcer with the support of a healthcare practitioner.

Doppler Test

You may have a test of your blood flow to help the healthcare professionals decide whether your ulcer is caused by problems with your arteries or your veins. Your blood pressure will be measured in both arms and then compared to the pressure measured in both legs. It is important to carry out this test, as the main treatment for venous ulcers is compression (using bandages or stockings/socks) to improve the vein circulation in your legs. It's not safe to apply compression if the ankle artery pressures are low. Your healthcare professional will advise you if it is safe to apply compression for arterial leg ulcers.

Duplex ultrasound

You may also be offered a Duplex Ultrasound. This is a type of scan that uses high-frequency sound waves (ultrasound) to produce a picture of the veins or arteries in your legs. It is sometimes used to diagnose varicose veins.



What people say

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**It is really useful
to have a resource
which is written by patients
for patients –
I feel better informed**

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Treatment Options

Treatment options depend on the cause of your diagnosis – whether the ulcer is caused by problems with your veins, your arteries, or sometimes both.

Venous Leg Ulcer Treatment

The most common treatment for venous leg ulcers is compression and may start straight away. Venous ulcers usually improve rapidly with compression treatment. To improve blood flow in your legs and help reduce swelling, your healthcare professional may apply a firm compression bandage or stocking over the affected leg. There are many different types of bandage or elastic stockings used to treat venous leg ulcers. Compression stockings / socks are the most common treatment and can be self-applied.

The application of a compression **bandage** is a skilled procedure and should only be done by trained healthcare staff. You'll see your nurse at least once a week at the start of your treatment to have your dressings and compression bandages changed. You may be able to apply compression stockings / socks yourself once shown by your healthcare professional.



Some treatments work by closing the vein where the damaged valves are which forces the blood to travel in the healthy veins. These may include:

- Endothermal Ablation - heat is applied inside the vein causing it to close.
- Foam Sclerotherapy - a foam is injected into the vein using ultrasound.
- Surgical removal of the damaged vein

You will find more information on compression on the NWCSP website:

<https://www.nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/compression-resource-for-people-with-wounds/>

Arterial Leg Ulcer Treatment

Arterial ulcers are often very painful, they are often on the foot, around the ankle, sometimes the lower leg. They are prone to infection, so antibiotics are often needed, but treating the infection alone will not heal the ulcer in most cases. For many of these non-healing, painful ulcers, further treatment is needed to improve the blood supply to the ulcer. To improve the blood supply to the ulcer an angioplasty (a procedure that can open up narrowed or blocked arteries) is often used, or surgery to clear out a blockage from a leg artery (endarterectomy) or a bypass operation to put in a new route for blood flow in the leg. With a better circulation the pain often improves quickly, and the ulcer can start to heal.



After Your Appointment

After your appointment, you should have more of an understanding of what may be causing your ulcer and what treatment you can have. Once your ulcer is healing well, your healthcare professional will see you less often.

It is essential that you follow the treatment guidance of your healthcare professional to ensure your ulcer heals. Once healed you may be referred for on-going follow up care. You will need to continue a plan of care even after your ulcer is healed to prevent it from coming back. If you are unable to do your treatment plan, let your healthcare professional know.

Prevention / Aiding Healing

How can you help the skin in leg ulcer treatment and prevention?

Exercise

Keeping mobile and walking every day uses the muscles in the leg to help pump the water and fluid in the leg back to the heart. This is called the 'muscle pump'. Sitting in a chair all day or standing can affect the speed of leg ulcer healing. If it is not possible to walk much then toe or ankle exercises help the muscle pump.

If you are unable to move your legs you may be able to use elasticated leg lifters to pull the toes backwards and forwards. You should keep the legs elevated when not moving around to help blood circulation. If someone can help you can do passive limb exercises - where the other person moves the foot or leg for you, this would also help.

Skin Care

Good skin care with moisturising cream purchased from a pharmacy keeps the skin moist avoiding dry and scaly skin. If dry and scaly skin occurs this can increase the risk of skin infection, irritation and leg ulcers.

Nutrition

To aid wound healing a very well-balanced diet and good hydration helps skin nutrition and healing.

Resources / Checklists

- Legs Matter - <https://legsmatter.org/information-and-support/type-of-ulcers/venous-leg-ulcers/>
- NHS - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/leg-ulcer/>
- The Circulation Foundation: - https://circulationfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/Circulation_Foundation_Leg_Ulcers_Info_Leaflet.pdf
- British Association of Dermatologists - <https://www.bad.org.uk/pils/venous-leg-ulcers/>

For more information, scan this QR code or visit nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/nwcsp-publications-and-resources



A programme commissioned by NHS England.