Leg Wounds: Stasis Ulcers

Have you developed open sores on your lower legs and maybe even your feet? Do you have swelling in your lower legs and feet? You may have a condition called stasis ulcers. People with a history of varicose veins, circulatory problems with their heart and lungs, and also those with diabetes may be susceptible to the development of stasis ulcers. Also, people who are overweight and not very active can develop a stasis ulcer.

Stasis ulcers form as a result of fluid accumulation in the tissues of the lower legs and feet. The veins in the legs that usually pump these fluids back up to the top of the body do not work properly, so the fluids build up under the skin and then burst open causing the fluid to weep out of the wound. It is usually a clear colored fluid. The area surrounding the ulcer wound is usually tender and can be painful. These wounds are different from ulcers or bedsores that develop from pressure on a bony area of the ankle or on the heels; pressure ulcers are caused by a lack of blood flow entirely. With stasis ulcers the blood flows down to the area of the lower legs and feet, but cannot flow back up toward the heart; then the fluids from the veins seep out into surrounding tissues and accumulate. If you develop a wound on your legs or feet, please see a physician right away so that a plan of treatment can be determined and worsening of the wound can be prevented.

Most physicians recommend cleansing a stasis ulcer with mild soap and water, then pat dry. Next, a thin layer of petroleum jelly is applied with a cotton swab to the wound to keep bandages from sticking. Then a clean dry gauze square is applied. If there is a lot of fluid draining from the wound, several layers of gauze can be applied. A stretch tubing or “stockinette” type netting is a tube that is slipped over the leg to hold the dressing in place; most physicians prefer not to tape the gauze bandages because the tape can harm the surrounding skin or harm the wound that is trying to heal.

The physician might also prescribe compression stockings to be worn over the dressings during the day. These are strong elastic stockings that compress the fluids back upward and prevent further pooling. They come in different sizes and usually require a measurement for proper fit. They can then be purchased at a medical supply store or a pharmacy. The most important thing about putting these stockings on is to have a smooth fit without wrinkles. Gather them up with two hands and put them on over the toes first, then stretch them upwards as you put them on. It is easier to put these on if you have someone that can help you. They can be taken off at bedtime; most people rinse them out in cool water and hang them on a hanger to dry overnight. They really help prevent further ulcers from developing and can help in the healing process.

Stasis ulcers usually heal in a couple of months with diligent treatment. It is especially helpful to keep your feet and legs up when sitting down. Consult your physician if you notice any of the following:

* Increased redness around the wound
* A change in the fluid that leaks from the wound, from clear to a yellow or green drainage
* Any foul odor coming from the wound that is different
* Appearance of a scab over the wound
* Increased warmth around the wound

Your physician can tell you if you are at risk for developing stasis ulcers; regular checks in the shower of your feet and legs can help identify them early so that treatment and healing can begin.