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Home Illnesses and conditions Skin, hair and nails Pressure ulcers Pressure ulcers are an injury that breaks down the skin and underlying tissue. They are caused when an area of skin is placed under pressure. They are sometimes known as “bedsores” or “pressure sores”. Pressure ulcers can range in severity from patches of discoloured skin to open wounds that expose the underlying bone or muscle. Read more about the symptoms of pressure ulcers. Pressure ulcers can develop when a large amount of pressure is applied to an area of skin over a short period of time. They can also occur when less pressure is applied over a longer period of time. The extra pressure disrupts the flow of blood through the skin. Without a blood supply, the affected skin becomes starved of oxygen and nutrients, and begins to break down, leading to an ulcer forming. Pressure ulcers tend to affect people with health conditions that make it difficult to move, especially those confined to lying in a bed or sitting for prolonged periods of time. Conditions that affect the flow of blood through the body, such as type 2 diabetes, can also make a person more vulnerable to pressure ulcers. Learn more about the causes of pressure ulcers. It’s estimated that just under half a million people in the UK will develop at least 1 pressure ulcer in any given year. This is usually people with an underlying health condition – for example, around 1 in 20 people who are admitted to hospital with a sudden illness will develop a pressure ulcer. People over 70 years old are particularly vulnerable to pressure ulcers, as they are more likely to have mobility problems and ageing skin. Treatment for pressure ulcers includes the use of dressings, creams and gels designed to speed up the healing process and relieve pressure. Surgery is sometimes recommended for the most serious cases. For some people, pressure ulcers are an inconvenience that require minor nursing care. For others, they can be serious and lead to life-threatening complications, such as blood poisoning or gangrene. Read more about the complications of pressure ulcers. Pressure ulcers can be unpleasant, upsetting and challenging to treat. Therefore, a range of techniques is used to prevent them developing in the first place. These include: Read about treating pressure ulcers and preventing pressure ulcers for more information. Unfortunately, even with the highest standards of care, it’s not always possible to prevent pressure ulcers in particularly vulnerable people. The parts of the body most at risk of developing pressure ulcers are those that are not covered by a large amount of body fat and are in direct contact with a supporting surface, such as a bed or a wheelchair. For example, if you are unable to get out of bed, you are at risk of developing pressure ulcers on your: If you are a wheelchair user, you are at risk of developing pressure ulcers on: