

Overview

Venous leg ulcer

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A venous leg ulcer is a chronic (long-lasting) sore that takes more than 2 weeks to heal. They usually develop on the inside of the leg, just above the ankle.

The symptoms of a venous leg ulcer include pain, itching and swelling in the affected leg.

There may also be discoloured or hardened skin around the ulcer. The sore may produce a foul-smelling discharge.

See your GP if you think you have a leg ulcer. It will need specialist treatment to help it heal.

Your GP will examine your leg and may carry out more tests to rule out other conditions.

Read more about [how a venous leg ulcer is diagnosed](#)

Causes of venous leg ulcers

A venous leg ulcer is the most common type of leg ulcer. They are caused by diseases of the leg veins such as varicose veins or as a complication of a DVT (Deep Vein Thrombosis).

Venous leg ulcers can develop after a minor injury. It can happen where persistently high pressure in the veins of the legs has damaged the skin.

Read more about the [causes of venous leg ulcers](#)

Who's affected

Venous leg ulcers affect around 1 in 500 people in Ireland. They become much more common with age.

It's estimated around 1 in 50 people over the age of 80 has one.

You're more at risk of developing a venous leg ulcer if you:

- previously had deep vein thrombosis (DVT)
- recently had an operation on your leg, such as a hip replacement or knee replacement
- have swollen and enlarged veins (varicose veins)

You're also at risk if you find it difficult to walk because of a problem such as:

- osteoarthritis
- a leg injury
- obesity
- paralysis

How venous leg ulcers are treated

Most venous leg ulcers heal within 3 to 4 months.

Treatment is compression therapy for leg ulcers.

Some ulcers may take longer to heal. A very small number never heal.

Treatment usually involves:

- cleaning and dressing the wound
- using compression, such as bandages or stockings, to improve the flow of blood in the legs

Antibiotics may also be used if the ulcer becomes infected, but they do not help ulcers heal.

Unless the cause of the ulcer is dealt with, there's a high risk of a venous leg ulcer coming back after treatment.

Treating your varicose veins, if you have them, will reduce the risk of leg ulcers coming back.

If you have deep vein disease the risk of an ulcer coming back can be reduced by wearing compression (surgical) stockings.

Read more about [treatment for venous leg ulcers](#)

Preventing venous leg ulcers

There are several ways to help [prevent developing a venous leg ulcer](#) in people at risk.

These include:

- wearing compression stockings
- losing weight if you're overweight
- exercising regularly

- elevating your leg when possible

These measures are important if you previously had a leg ulcer.

This is because you're at increased risk of having another one in the same leg within months or years.

Read our advice on [exercise and how to eat well](#)

Other types of leg ulcer

Other common types of leg ulcer include:

- arterial leg ulcers – caused by poor blood circulation in the arteries
- diabetic leg ulcers – usually affects the feet
- traumatic leg ulcers – caused by injury to the leg
- malignant leg ulcers

Content supplied by the [NHS](#) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 23 March 2021

Next review due: 23 March 2024

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

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