

# PREVENTING VENOUS LEG ULCERS

## What is a venous leg ulcer?

A venous leg ulcer is a wound between the knee and ankle that is slow to heal **because of vein problems** (*Chronic Venous Insufficiency*)

## Preventing venous leg ulcers - Compression hosiery

If you have had a venous leg ulcer before, research shows that there is up to a 70% chance of recurrence. Continuing to wear compression therapy after a venous leg ulcer has healed is important to prevent another one.

It is recommended that the compression therapy (usually bandages) used to heal the ulcer is continued for two weeks after the ulcer has healed. Following this, wearing compression hosiery will help prevent swelling due to blood pooling in the leg veins by assisting the action of the muscle pump and supporting the valves in the veins.

**Compression hosiery needs to be worn for the whole day, every day to be effective.**

One of the benefits of compression hosiery is that they can be removed for bathing or showering, washing your leg and in bed when your legs are elevated. Wearing compression hosiery is also recommended if you have vein problems (*Chronic Venous Insufficiency*) even if you have never had a venous leg ulcer.

## Types of compression hosiery

Medical grade compression hosiery includes stockings and socks. These are different from hosiery designed to prevent blood clots in the lower leg, such as flight socks, or anti-embolic stockings.

Compression hosiery is classified according to the different pressures that are applied at the ankle and calf. Compression pressure levels can range from low to very high.

It is important the leg is measured at the ankle and the calf so you get the correct size for your leg.

Your health professional will advise you on the best compression level for you. It is recommended that you wear the highest compression level you can manage.

## Obtaining compression hosiery

High compression level hosiery should not be purchased without assessment by a qualified health care professional. As some conditions such as diabetes can affect blood flow, this has to be considered when selecting compression hosiery.

Compression hosiery might be purchased from pharmacies, on-line, suppliers of hosiery, or through your health care provider. Some health services may supply an initial set of compression hosiery.

There are a variety of colours, materials and sizes available with either an open (does not cover the toes) or closed toe (covers the toes). Many people find open toe hosiery is easier to apply than closed toe. Most people only need compression hosiery on their lower leg.

## Maintaining leg health

In addition to wearing compression hosiery, maintaining good general leg health is important to prevent another venous leg ulcer occurring. General leg health includes:

- Regular exercise, particularly walking. Avoid standing.
- Elevate legs when sitting.
- Skin care, including washing the leg and ulcer and moisturising. Treat skin conditions e.g. eczema.
- Eat a good diet and maintain normal weight.

**Please refer to the information sheet 'Treating Venous Leg Ulcers' for more information regarding leg health**

# PREVENTING VENOUS LEG ULCERS

## Getting hosiery on and off

Compression hosiery can be difficult to get on and off easily. Due to the elasticity it is not possible to roll the stocking up for application. Here are some hints:

- Do not apply moisturiser immediately before putting stockings on as this will make application much more difficult.
- Ideally, shower in the evening just before bed and apply your stockings before getting out of bed in the morning as leg swelling is less. If you cannot do this, apply your stockings as soon as possible after getting out of bed. The longer you do not wear your stockings, the more your leg becomes swollen, making the stocking much more difficult to apply.
- Do not roll or fold down the top of the stocking. This reduces blood flow to the leg.
- Always wear dishwashing gloves when putting stockings on as these will provide a good grip. Do not pull the stocking on by the top band. This will stretch the stocking and can tear it.
- A simple application method is to place your hand in the foot end, grasp the shaped heel section and partially turn the stocking inside out over the foot section. Slide your foot in to the foot section, ensuring your heel is centred in the right place. Then slide the stocking over itself and work it up the leg to just below the knee. Massage out any wrinkles.
- There are several aids to help get stockings on and off. Open toe stockings may be easier to apply if they are threaded over an inner slipper sleeve or a plastic bag can be placed over the foot and pulled out from the open toe once the stocking is in place.

- Metal frames that stretch open the stocking before you 'step' into the stocking are available.
- There are also plastic shapes with attached cords that allow the stocking to be threaded over the foot and then removed from the top.
- There are some new aids that can assist with removal of stockings as well as application.

Stocking application aids are available from stocking suppliers and some mobility aid suppliers.

## Caring for compression hosiery

Further information on caring for compression hosiery is usually supplied with the garment, or your health care professional will advise you about this.

To get the best out of your compression hosiery the following is recommended:

- Hand wash compression hosiery using mild soap or use a washing bag in the machine on the warm or cold gentle cycle. Avoid using fabric softener or rinse aid as this damages the elastic fibres.
- Lay compression hosiery flat to dry. Avoid drying compression hosiery in direct sunlight, on heated rails or in clothes driers. Do not iron compression hosiery. High heat will damage the elastic fibres and reduce the life span and effectiveness.
- Compression hosiery will lose its elasticity over time and will not be effective. It is recommended that compression hosiery is replaced every 3 to 6 months. Before purchasing new compression hosiery it is important your leg is measured to ensure the best fit as your leg size may change over time.