

Protecting Vulnerable Heels

Tips for Nursing Assistants

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Patients who spend long periods of time in bed can be especially susceptible to pressure ulcers and other injuries to their heels. Heel pressure ulcers are a serious health concern for patients. Besides being painful, they can possibly lead to infection, cellulitis, osteomyelitis, septicemia, limb amputation and even death.

Pressure ulcers often form on the heel because:

- It has a bony prominence
- There are no oil glands, so the skin gets dry¹

Heel pressure ulcers can also be very expensive for facilities. They're the most common facility-acquired pressure ulcer in long-term care facilities and the second most common among all healthcare settings. And complex heel pressure ulcers are among the most costly complications for the elderly.²



You can help prevent heel pressure ulcers by turning patients regularly and by making sure they're well-nourished and well-hydrated. There are also many helpful products available for heels.

Pillows

The National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel (NPUAP) recommends the use of pillows. Pillows are an easy and cost-effective way to elevate the heels of cooperative individuals.³ But pillows are not recommended for patients who might move the leg off the pillow or if the leg must be elevated longer than 24 hours. For these patients, it's best to use a product that stays on the foot during movement, such as a heel offloading device, or heel boot.⁴



Tip: For best results, place pillows lengthwise under the calf with the heel suspended in the air.³

Heel offloading devices

Often shaped like a large boot, heel offloading devices surround the foot and ankle on all sides and leave space for needed air flow.

Benefits of heel offloading devices:

- Stays in place
- Pressure redistribution
- Friction and shear reduction
- Ankle separation and protection
- Foot drop prevention



Tip: Remove heel offloading devices every shift and inspect the patient's skin for redness.

Moisturizers and padding devices

Padding devices (sheep skin or bunny boots) and moisturizers help minimize friction and shear, but they don't provide protection from excessive pressure.⁵



Tip: Look for moisturizers with nourishing topical nutrients and ingredients that add a layer of protection on top of the skin, such as dimethicone.

Despite the best efforts of caregivers, some patients still experience heel pressure ulcers. When you find a heel pressure ulcer, contact your facility's wound care or treatment nurse, as these wounds often require specialized care.

Heel pressure ulcers can pose a significant threat to your patients' health and your facility's bottom line. However, there are steps you can take to reduce heel pressure ulcers.

References

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