Preventing Pressure Sores

Pressure sores, also called bedsores, pressure ulcers or decubitus ulcers, happen when skin and tissue are damaged by pressure or friction. These sores can happen anywhere on the body, but they are most common on bony or firm areas, such as the tailbone, hips, heels, elbows, ears or ankles.
Pressure sores can be a serious problem and hard to heal. Care must be taken to prevent pressure sores from forming.

Causes of pressure sores
Pressure on the skin is the most common cause. The pressure against the skin can limit blood flow to the tissue. Damage can happen in 1 to 2 hours if the pressure is not removed.
Pressure sores can also be caused by friction or rubbing that causes the skin to be ripped open or scraped off. This can happen if you are pulled across bed sheets or when fragile skin tears as it is scraped against a surface. The skin may look red and feel like it is burning. This is called shear or shearing.

Who is at risk?
You may be more at risk for pressure sores if you:
• Are not able to move without help or have limited movement.
• Have a loss of feeling or nerve damage to parts of your body. This may prevent you from feeling pressure or soreness on your skin.
• Have skin that is often wet or soiled.
• Must stay in bed or a chair most of the time.
• Have poor blood flow or other severe illness.
• Are older or frail and have thin skin.
• Are not eating well or eat foods that do not provide enough nutrients.

How to prevent pressure sores
Here are some things you can do to protect your skin and prevent pressure sores:
• Check your skin often during the day if you are in bed or in a chair most of the time. Look for areas of redness over bony places, such as your tailbone, hips, elbows, heels, ears and ankles. If you need help, have another person check your skin each day or use a mirror to see.
• If you have any loss of feeling in your toes or feet, check your feet and between and under your toes at least one time each day. You may need to use a mirror or have another person check your feet.
• Keep your skin dry. You may want to use moisture barrier products on skin that is often wet from sweating, wound drainage or urine. If sheets or wound dressings are wet, change them often to protect your skin from the moisture.
• Eat a well balanced diet and drink 6 to 8 glasses of fluids each day to keep you skin healthy.
• Keep your skin clean. Do not use harsh soaps and skin care products that have alcohol in them. Put moisturizing lotion on your skin often.
• Gently pat your skin dry with a towel. Do not rub your skin.
• Protect your skin from friction, shearing and rubbing.
• Do not use hot water or heating pads.
• If you are incontinent of urine or stool, clean the skin gently and well after each episode. Try to set up a bowel or bladder program to limit incontinence.

Protecting your skin when in bed
If you must stay in bed, here are some more things you can do to protect your skin and prevent pressure sores:
• Change your body position at least every 2 to 4 hours. You may want to use an alarm or timer to help you remember to move.
• Use pillows or a foam wedge to help keep bony surfaces from touching each other. For example:
  ▶ Place a pillow between your legs at the knees when you are lying on your side.
  ▶ Place a pillow under your lower legs to keep your heels off the bed.
• Keep the bottom sheet free from wrinkles. Be sure to remove any crumbs and avoid placing items on the bed. Keep items on a bedside table.
• Do not massage over bony parts like the hips, tailbone, shoulders and ankles. Massage may cause damage to the tissue under the skin.
• Ask your doctor or nurse about special equipment, beds or pads that may help protect your skin.

Protecting your skin when in a chair
If you are in a chair or wheelchair, here are some more things you can do to protect your skin and prevent pressure sores:
• Sit up straight in the chair and shift your weight from one side to the other every 15 minutes.
• Use a foot rest or foot stool to support your feet, so there is not too much pressure on the backs of your knees.
• Use a special seat cushion or pad that is made to reduce pressure. Do not use a ring or “donut” cushion to sit on. Do not use sheepskin.
Call your doctor if you have:

- Pink, red, purple or blue areas on your skin from pressure.
- Skin over a bony area that feels firm, warm or cool compared to the skin around it.
- Any open sores, shiny spots, blisters or places where the skin has been rubbed or scraped off.