



Pressure sores

If you are looking after a person with dementia you will want to take particular care to ensure that they do not develop pressure sores. Older people who are not very mobile are particularly vulnerable to this problem. Pressure sores are usually easy to treat at an early stage. However, if left untreated, they will get worse and can be dangerous or even fatal.

What is a pressure sore?

It is a damaged area of skin, which occurs when, over time, pressure reduces or cuts off the blood supply to a particular part of the body. If you notice any red patches on the person's skin, which do not disappear after a few hours, these may well be pressure sores.

Whenever you help the person with dementia to wash or dress, or if they seem to be in discomfort, be alert to the possibility that pressure sores may be present. You should contact your GP or community health clinic straight away, as pressure sores need immediate attention.

Lying in bed

People normally move around in bed, even while sleeping. However, in the later stages of dementia, the person may not move for long periods of time. This may be because of the lack of motivation associated with dementia in the later stages or a physical disability, or a combination of the two. This lack of movement can lead to pressure sores.

If the person lies on their back, pressure sores may occur on the heels and the buttocks or any area of the body, which presses against the bed or chair for a prolonged period. Areas such as the shoulders, shoulder blades, hips and ankles are at risk especially if the person is very thin. This is because there is less protective tissue in these areas.

- Try to ensure that the person does not remain in one position for too long when lying in bed. Ask the community nurse for advice on how to help them to move.
- Encourage the person to get out of bed during the day and to move around as much as possible when they are up, either independently or with help.

Sitting in a chair

Most people move around naturally when they are sitting down. However, in the later stages of dementia, people may remain seated for long periods in one position because of the lack of motivation already referred to, physical disability, or a combination of the two. As a result, pressure sores may occur.

- Encourage the person to rock from side to side in the chair or to change their position while they are sitting.

4th Floor, 79 Roeland Street (Corner Harrington & Roeland Str), Cape Town
Tel [+27 21 421-0077](tel:+27214210077) / 78 Fax [+27 21 418-2772](tel:+27214182772) Email: info@dementiasa.org
www.dementiasa.org

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049-191 NPO PBO 930022142



- Help them to stand up at least once every couple of hours and to walk around.

Friction

As people age their skin becomes increasingly delicate and even quite mild friction on the skin can result in pressure sores.

- Take care not to drag a person unintentionally across the bed or chair when helping them to move.
- Ensure that there are no rough seams in clothes or any objects left in pockets, which could cause friction.
- Check that bedding is smooth. Even wrinkles in the sheets can contribute to pressure sores and a person in the later stages of dementia will not be able to tell you if they can feel something like this.

Treatment

If the pressure sore is noticed at a very early stage, you may be able to use simple measures such as removing the cause of the friction and helping the person to move frequently. There are aids to protect the body such as fleecy pads, special cushions or mattresses, which help to prevent the development of pressure sores.

If the skin has broken the area will need to be dressed by a home based carer or at the clinic. Pressure sores which have become infected are painful, can make the person ill and may become dangerous and even fatal.

Precautions

- Try to make sure that the person eats a good balanced diet. Good nutrition means that the skin will be healthier and more resistant to sores.
- Help the person to exercise regularly. Exercise improves the circulation and helps relieve any pressure which has built up.
- If the person is incontinent make sure that they do not remain in wet clothes or a wet bed. If urine remains in contact with the skin for any length of time it will make it spongy and less resistant to sores.
- Avoid tight clothing or bedding, especially over the feet
- Excessive heat and moisture can also contribute to pressure sores. Try to prevent the person becoming hot and sweaty.
- Make sure that the person is completely dry after a bath or a wash, particularly in the skin folds. Pat dry rather than rub.
- Never rub or massage any places where the skin has reddened as this could cause further damage.
- Encourage the person or help them to move their position when they are lying or sitting for any length of time.

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- Pressure sores tend to occur when there is a significant degree of physical or mental impairment or both. The person will not be able to tell you if any particular area of their skin is uncomfortable. They will depend on you to provide the early warning system for them.

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