Information for Patients and Families about Pressure Sores (Pressure Ulcers)

What is a Pressure Ulcer?

A **pressure ulcer** (also known as a **bed sore** or **decubitus ulcer**) is an injury to the skin and underlying tissue caused by prolonged pressure on the skin. This pressure reduces blood flow to the area, which can damage the skin and tissues.

Causes of Pressure Ulcers

Pressure ulcers typically develop when a person is in one position for a long time, leading to sustained pressure on specific areas of the body. **Common causes include**:

- **Prolonged pressure** on areas like heels, buttocks, elbows, or the back of the head.
- **Friction and shear** forces when skin rubs against clothing or bedding.
- **Moisture**, such as from incontinence, which can weaken the skin.
- **Poor nutrition** or dehydration, which can make the skin more vulnerable.

Who is at risk? People who are **immobile**, **elderly**, **bedbound**, or who have medical conditions affecting their circulation, such as diabetes, are at higher risk of developing pressure ulcers.

Early Signs of a Pressure Ulcer

Recognizing pressure ulcers early can prevent them from becoming more serious. Look out for the following signs:

- **Redness or discoloration** of the skin that doesn't fade when you press on it (a sign of reduced blood flow).
- **Pain or tenderness** in a particular area of the body.
- **Swelling or warmth** in a specific area.
- **Blisters or open sores** in more advanced stages.

If you notice any of these signs, it's important to inform your healthcare team immediately.

How to Prevent Pressure Ulcers

You can help prevent pressure ulcers with some simple steps:

1. **Reposition regularly**: If bedbound or in a wheelchair, change position every **2 hours**. Use pillows or cushions to relieve pressure points.
2. **Use pressure-relieving equipment**: Mattress overlays, foam cushions, or air mattresses can reduce pressure on vulnerable areas.
3. **Keep the skin clean and dry**: Moist skin is more prone to damage. Use moisture barriers or incontinence products to prevent skin irritation.
4. **Maintain good nutrition and hydration**: Eat a balanced diet with sufficient protein, vitamins (especially A, C, and zinc), and drink enough fluids to keep skin healthy.

5. **Exercise**: If possible, help the person move, stretch, and change positions. Even small movements can help relieve pressure.
6. **Check skin regularly**: Examine skin daily for signs of redness, blisters, or sores, especially on pressure points (e.g., heels, sacrum, elbows).

Implications of Having a Pressure Ulcer

If pressure ulcers are not treated promptly, they can lead to:

- **Infections**: Open sores can become infected, leading to more serious conditions
- **Pain and discomfort**: Pressure ulcers can be very painful, affecting daily activities and quality of life.
- **Longer hospital stays**: If pressure ulcers develop, it may require extended care, including wound treatments and possibly surgery.
- **Reduced mobility**: Severe pressure ulcers may require strict bed rest, which can affect a person's ability to move or perform basic activities.

Treatment Options

Treatment depends on the severity of the pressure ulcer. Options include:

- **Wound care**: Regular cleaning/dressing changes help to prevent infection and promote healing.
- **Pressure relief**: Use of specialized mattresses, cushions, and regular repositioning.
- **Medications**: Pain relief and antibiotics if an infection develops.
- **Surgical options**: In severe cases, surgery may be required to remove damaged tissue or repair deep ulcers.

Risk of Developing Pressure Ulcers in the Future

Once a pressure ulcer has healed, the skin may be more vulnerable to developing future ulcers. Continuing preventative measures is important, including:

- Regular skin checks and repositioning.
- Ongoing use of pressure-relieving equipment.
- Maintaining overall health, including good nutrition and hydration.

What You and Your Family Can Do

- **Monitor the skin** for any changes, and alert your healthcare provider if you notice any early signs of pressure ulcers.
- **Help with repositioning** if the patient is unable to do so themselves.
- **Ensure proper nutrition** and hydration to promote healing and prevent future ulcers.

By working together, pressure ulcers can be prevented and managed effectively, improving overall health and comfort.