

focus on

Serious Injury Care

Ideas, trends and solutions in serious injury care | February 2009 | www.bayshore.ca

Skin care is essential to good health

People who have sustained a serious injury, such as a spinal cord injury or a brain injury, must deal with a cascade of new challenges in their lives. One of the less obvious but critically important aspects is taking care of the skin.

The skin is the body's largest organ – it acts as a barrier, regulates our fluids and body temperature, and functions as a sensory organ. Many factors play a role in its well-being, from nutrition and hydration to circulation and hygiene. When someone is injured, many physical changes take place, and these can have a negative impact on the health of the skin.

“Our primary goal is prevention – being mindful of skin and making sure you don't become susceptible to breakdown,” says Katherine Grant-Brown, Clinical Practice Leader at Bayshore Home Health's National Service Centre and facilitator of the company's skin health and wound care program.

“One of the things we do when admitting someone into service is a risk assessment, and that includes the Braden Scale, an assessment for potential risk factors that could lead to the development of a pressure ulcer, which is the most common wound type for people who have had a serious injury.”

The Braden Scale assesses six areas. The first is sensory perception – due to a lack of physical sensation, a person may not be

aware of bodily discomfort that requires a change in position. He or she is at greater risk for injuring body parts such as arms and legs, so it is important to eliminate safety hazards. Injured individuals are also more susceptible to damage from freezing and burns, and minor cuts take on greater significance, as they are vulnerable to infection.

The second area is moisture. Skin that is too dry due to dehydration is vulnerable to damage, and skin that is too wet because of incontinence or perspiration breaks down easily. To avoid drying out the skin, Grant-Brown suggests using moisturizer and products designed for sensitive skin rather than regular soap. For incontinence, there are products such as pads and briefs that can keep moisture away from the skin.

Lack of physical activity increases risk of pressure ulcers

The third area is the level of physical activity. Less activity means the person is sitting or lying down more often, which increases their risk of pressure ulcers. The person should change positions (with assistance, if needed) on a regular schedule to avoid putting too much pressure on certain areas of the body. The most



susceptible areas are the elbows, shoulder blades, lower back, knees, ankles, heels and side of the hips.

The scale also looks at mobility, and whether the person is able to change and control his or her body position. A decrease in blood circulation due to lower activity and mobility can lead to skin problems, including cell death and ulcers. Frequent position changes can help prevent skin breakdown. Smoking also reduces oxygen in the bloodstream, which can increase the risk of ulcers and slow down healing.

The amount of friction and shearing is also assessed. Friction is pulling on the surface of the skin, such as when a person slides across bed sheets because he or she cannot lift up, and shearing is internal – bone rubbing against tissue – and can

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happen if a person slides down in a bed or chair because he or she cannot maintain the position.

The final category is nutrition. Good nutrition is essential, especially since people may gain weight due to decreased mobility, and excess weight raises the risk of pressure ulcers. "If people don't think their diet is balanced, they should contact a nutritionist," advises Grant-Brown.

She stresses that the approach to skin care varies greatly from patient to patient. "One of the key things to remember within skin health and wound care is that it's extremely individualized. How you treat it is going to be very different from one client to the next based on underlying factors. How we care for a client's wound is absolutely centred around how they would like us to care for it. There's no cookie-cutter answer. You'll hear 'it depends' a lot."

Approach to skin care varies greatly from patient to patient

At Bayshore, nurses perform skin-health assessments, and personal support workers – who are likely to see a client more frequently – contribute by documenting their observations and making note of changes in the Braden Scale's categories. "They're absolutely integral in the team concept of caring for someone with serious injury who may be at risk of developing a wound," says Grant-Brown.

She adds that when it comes to skin-health assessment, there is a lack of standardization around the world. To aid its clinicians, Bayshore has developed a point-of-care skin assessment tool, which includes a section on pressure ulcers.

Focus on Serious Injury Care is published by Bayshore Home Health for its serious injury clients and health care professionals. The views and opinions contained in *Focus on Serious Injury Care* are not necessarily those of Bayshore Home Health. For more information about this newsletter or to submit story ideas, please contact Bayshore Home Health's Marketing Department at 905.822.8075/1.800.668.9490 or email mmamak@bayshore.ca.

Bayshore Home Health – a leader in serious injury home care

Bayshore Home Health is a Canadian-owned company and has been a trusted provider of home and community care services since 1966. It operates more than 40 home care offices and 20 community care clinics nationally, and works with many organizations that deliver specialized home care services to clients with serious injuries, including workers' compensation boards, auto insurers, rehabilitation service providers and government care agencies. To learn more about any of the services listed below, please call 1-866-265-1920.

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Katherine Grant-Brown

"In collaboration with a task group of clinicians from coast to coast and five key opinion leaders who are part of our national clinical advisory council, we've developed an initial assessment form. It's a standardized assessment of not just wounds, but the entire person, because what needs to be communicated in skin health and wound care is that you have to take a look at all underlying causes," says Grant-Brown. "If nutritional status is poor, if your mobility is poor, if you have problems with pressure – if these things aren't addressed, your wound is going to take a lot longer to heal. We do a very holistic initial assessment."

Bayshore has also developed a standardized care plan for wounds, based on evidence in the current medical literature. Its health care professionals examine three aspects to assess how well a wound is healing.

The first is the size of the wound, and how quickly it is diminishing. If a patient has a pressure ulcer, it is assessed using a staging system, developed by the U.S.-based National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel, and treated accordingly.

"It takes two years for remodelling, the final stage of healing, to occur, so you've always got to be cognizant of protecting that area," says Grant-Brown. She adds that once an ulcer has healed, that area

of skin will always be vulnerable because scar tissue is weaker than the original tissue. "It's only going to be 80 per cent as strong."

The second aspect is a reduction in the amount of care required – how many visits and dressing changes. Lastly, health care providers determine if the underlying causes that led to the development of the wound, such as dehydration, poor nutrition, or insufficient changing of positions, have been remedied.

Bayshore also has a new method for interim assessments, which are performed every two weeks on top of regular assessments. It takes a broader view, looking at the entire person for changes in nutrition, medication and other areas. These observations are compared to previous interim assessments to gauge progress. "This gives us a better snapshot as to whether we're on the right trajectory," says Grant-Brown.

Bayshore's 40-plus home care branches across Canada are currently phasing in these assessment tools. Last October, the company also launched a skin-health education program for personal support workers.

Prevention is essential for skin health

"The key message is that prevention is essential," says Grant-Brown. "Skin health is a collaborative effort. We certainly have the tools to support people in their skin health and wound care."