



Identifying urgent changes in your leg health

Knowing when to seek advice for a change in your lower limb condition is important so that you can get treatment before it deteriorates. Here we describe some common problems.



When managing a long-term condition such as venous leg ulceration or lymphoedema, it is important to recognise changes in your normal limb health that can be a sign that urgent treatment is needed. A sudden increase in pain, swelling, or fluid from the limb can be a sign that your condition has changed, perhaps as a result of infection, or because your treatment is no longer working. Here we describe some of the more commonly experienced problems of the lower limb.

Cellulitis

Cellulitis is a spreading infection of the skin and the underlying tissue. It occurs when a break in the skin allows bacteria to enter the body and cause infection. People with lymphoedema or venous leg ulcers are at an increased risk of cellulitis due to the fragility of the skin, so it is important to recognise the warning signs.

What are the signs of cellulitis?

Skin and tissue affected by cellulitis has been described as red, painful, hot, swollen



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and tender. Without treatment, the infection will spread. A feeling of being generally unwell and/or tired may occur before or at the same time as the skin symptoms.

Monitoring of the skin, regular moisturising and rapid treatment of any breaks such as wounds, scratches and bites should be carried out and observed to make sure healing takes place and cellulitis is prevented.

As it is a bacterial infection, commonly caused by *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus* bacteria, cellulitis needs urgent treatment with antibiotics. These may be given orally for mild infection, or intravenously if infection is more serious.

An episode of cellulitis increases the risk of it happening again. It is therefore important to practice good skin care to improve and maintain skin health, in order to prevent breaks in the skin from occurring. Monitoring of the skin, regular moisturising and rapid treatment of any breaks, such as wounds, scratches and bites, should be carried out and observed to make sure healing takes place and cellulitis is prevented.

Wearing compression can be painful if cellulitis is present, so the pressure it

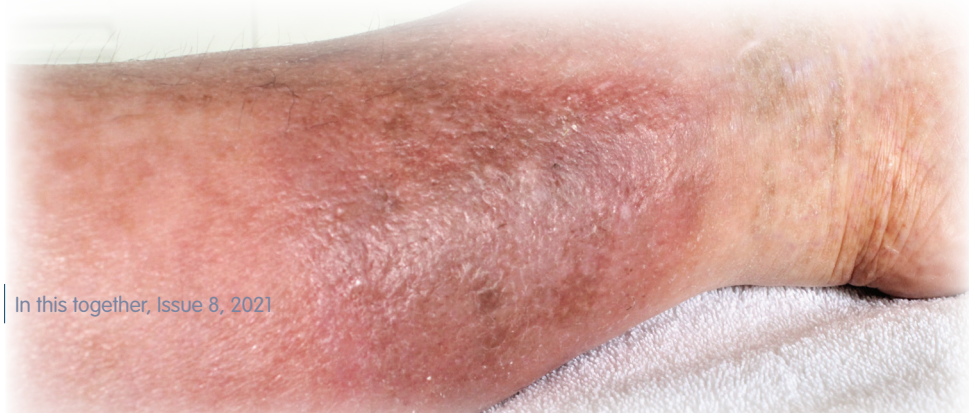
delivers may need to be reduced, or completely removed. However, normal compression should be re-applied as soon as it can be tolerated as it helps to support the venous and lymphatic systems during the infection.

Wound infection

If you have a wound, such as a venous leg ulcer, you should look for signs of improvement or deterioration at every dressing change. Local wound infection is common, and is usually accompanied by the classic signs of redness, warmth, new or more pain than usual and swelling around the wound. The wound may also be producing pus or more wound fluid than usual and may be malodorous. If you have any of these symptoms, you will need an assessment and possible antimicrobial treatment, so contact your healthcare professional for advice.

If the above symptoms are accompanied by suddenly feeling generally unwell, urgent help should be sought as this may be a sign of spreading infection.

A wound that has been present for several weeks or months without





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making any progress towards healing may contain a biofilm. This is a collection of micro-organisms in the wound that can prevent healing. A biofilm can avoid detection by the immune system and so its presence may not be accompanied by any signs of infection.

Biofilm is thought to be present in the majority of chronic wounds.

If your wound has been failing to make progress for some time, it may be worth discussing biofilm-based wound management with your clinician. This involves simple treatment to remove the biofilm and prevent it from recurring by using cleansing, debriding and using antimicrobial dressings. These steps may be enough to encourage your wound to heal.

Lymphorrhea (wet, leaky legs)

Lymphorrhea is a condition in which lymph fluid leaks through the skin of the lower limbs. For this reason it is also commonly referred to as 'leaky legs' or 'wet legs'.

Normally, fluid in the tissues is kept in balance by the lymphatic system. Swelling occurs, however, if there is a problem with the ability of the lymphatics to do this. As swelling progresses, the legs can become very swollen, causing the skin to stretch, and in some cases, blister. The fluid in the tissues then leaks out through the skin, indicating there


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is an underlying problem with the ability of the lymphatic system to handle fluid in a normal way.

Lymphorrhea can be caused by a sudden change in health or routine. Deteriorating health

or infection can contribute, as can sitting more than usual, reduced mobility, or no longer wearing compression even though it is needed.

Limbs affected by lymphorrhea are constantly wet, may have fluid running down them and the skin may be shiny and cold as a result. The skin may become white and boggy (macerated) as a consequence of being continually wet, or red and raw (excoriated). The limb may be very painful, and uncomfortable due to swelling and heaviness. The damaged and fragile skin is at risk of ulceration and infection, so help should be sought. Your clinician will work with you to identify the cause of the leaking, and put steps in place to manage it. This usually involves a combination of skin care, leg elevation and compression therapy to alleviate the symptoms.

If you experience any of the problems described here, it is important to seek help from your healthcare professional to get the condition under control to prevent further deterioration and to minimise the impact on your everyday life. 

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