Pressure Ulcers: 
Treatment and Prevention

Douglas Fronzaglia II, DO, MS
LECOM Institute for Successful Aging
LECOM Institute for Advanced Wound Care
and Hyperbaric Medicine

Goal
Consider the possibility of pressure ulcer development
Objectives

- Identify ulcer stage during exam
- Recognize risk factors
- Implement strategies for prevention
- Utilize proper treatment
- Abandon unproven treatments

What is a Pressure Ulcer?

- Any lesion caused by unrelieved pressure resulting in damage to underlying tissue
- Result of prolonged issue ischemia
- Development is variable due to severity of illness and comorbid conditions
Why does it matter?

- 60,000 patients die yearly
- $11,000,000,000 spent yearly for treatment
- Up to $150,000 per ulcer
- 2,500,000 new pressure ulcers yearly
- 17,000 lawsuits per year
- Medical facilities are primarily responsible for prevention

Where do they develop?

Results from pressure, shearing force and friction.
How are they staged?

- Pressure ulcers are staged I – IV
- Escharred ulcers are called unstageable
- Deep tissue injury is a precursor to a pressure ulcer

Stage I Ulcer

- Skin still intact
- Painful
- Density changes
- Temperature changes
- Color changes
- Non-blanchable
Stage I Ulcer

- Partial thickness
- Loss of dermis
- Bulla
- Minimal slough
- No bruising

Stage II Ulcer

- Partial thickness
- Loss of dermis
- Bulla
- Minimal slough
- No bruising
Stage II Ulcer

- Full thickness
- Undermining
- Tunneling
- No exposed structures
  - muscle, tendon, bone

Stage III Ulcer

- Full thickness
- Undermining
- Tunneling
- No exposed structures
  - muscle, tendon, bone
Stage III Ulcer

- Full thickness
- Exposed structures
- Osteomyelitis risk

Stage IV Ulcer

- Full thickness
- Exposed structures
- Osteomyelitis risk
Stage IV Ulcer

Unstageable Ulcers

- Full thickness
- Unable to visualize base
- Keep in place
- Protective
Intrinsic: disease states and physiologic factors that increase the risk for pressure ulcer development
- Age over 70
- Malnutrition (low BMI)
- Arterial disease
- Dementia
- Delirium
- Frailty
Risk Factors

- **Extrinsic**: external factors that damage skin
  - Pressure
  - Friction
  - Shear forces
  - Incontinence (urinary, bowel)
  - Tissue hydration (hyper, hypo)

Risk Assessment Scales

- **Norton Scale**
  - Physical condition
  - Mental condition
  - Level of physical activity
  - Mobility
  - Continence or incontinence
Risk Assessment Scales

- Braden Scale
  - Sensory perception: ability to respond to pressure-related discomfort
  - Moisture: degree of exposure to moisture
  - Activity: degree of physical activity
  - Mobility: ability to change and control body position
  - Nutrition: usual food intake

Prevention Strategies

- Skin care
- Nutritional status
- Mechanical pressure reduction
- Mobility
- Support surfaces
Prevention Strategies
Skin Care

• Daily skin assessment and cleaning
• Manage skin hydration
  • Moisturize when dry
  • Incontinence issues
• Special attention to bony prominences
• Manage shear forces and friction
  • Routine turn and position
  • Skin lubricants

Prevention Strategies
Nutritional Status

• Protein-calorie malnutrition
  • Link to poor wound healing inconclusive
• Correct deficiencies only
  • No benefit in over-supplementing
• Enteral/parenteral route in severe cases
  • Need to discuss goals with patient/family
Prevention Strategies
Mechanical Pressure Reduction

- Heel ulcer account for over 20%
  - Assess and moisturize
  - Socks to reduce friction
- Reposition every 2 hours
- Keep head of bed as low as possible
- Shift weight when sitting every 15 minutes
  - ‘Doughnut pillows’ no longer used

Prevention Strategies
Mobility

- Patient’s ability to change and control body position
- Improved mobility prevents ulcers
- Immobility leads to pressure ulcers
- Aggressive PT/OT when appropriate
- Passive ROM exercises beneficial
Prevention Strategies
Support Surfaces

- Use for all at-risk patients
- Static support surface
  - Air, gel, water, foam
- Dynamic support surface
  - Alternating air mattress, low-air-loss mattress
  - Indicated for failure of static support surface
    - Morbid obesity, significant bony prominences

Treatment Plan

- Plan based on several factors:
  - Comorbid conditions
  - Patient participation
  - Care goals per patient and family
  - Location and quality of ulcer
Initial assessment

- Etiology of wound
- Exacerbating comorbidities
  - Peripheral vascular disease
  - Autoimmune disease, immunocompromise
  - Medications
  - Malnutrition
- Patient care and compliance
  - Caregiver competency
  - Patient care goals

Management

- Debridement
- Wound dressings
- Nutritional support
- Surgical options
Management
Debridement

• Sharp debridement
  • Use of sharp instrument to remove tissue
  • Direct visualization of result
  • Allow for optimization of the ‘woundscape’
    • Removal of callous
    • Optimized margins
    • Management of slough, devitalized tissue
Management
Debridement

- Enzymatic debridement
  - Collagenase ointment (Santyl) most common
  - Breaks down necrotic tissue
  - No harm to living tissue, granulation tissue
  - Use in conjunction with sharp debridement
- Autolytic debridement
  - Not preferred
  - Allows dead tissue to dissolve spontaneously
  - Very slow process
Management
Debridement

- Biotherapy
  - Use of live, disinfected maggots (fly larvae)
  - Digest only dead tissue
  - Applied for 2 – 3 days with special dressing
  - Not commonly used
Management
Debridement

• Mechanical (wet-to-dry, wet-to-moist)
  • Not recommended
  • Dead tissue adheres to dressing as it dries
  • Very painful when removed
  • No effective method to reduce pain
  • Live tissue often damaged during removal

Management
Dressings

• Basic principle is to optimize moisture
  • Absorptive dressings for draining wounds
  • Hydrating dressings for dry wounds
  • Addition of silver for high bioburden
Management
Dressings

- Wounds with moderate - heavy exudate
  - Alginate
    - Highly absorptive, forms gel
    - Derived from seaweed
    - Biodegradable
  - Hydrophilic dressing (foam)
    - Highly absorptive
    - Typically used over alginate
    - Can help cushion wound

Management
Alginate Dressing
Management
Dressings

- Wounds that are dry or minimal exudate
  - Hydrogels
    - Gel, impregnated gauze, sheet
    - 90% water
    - Will help to hydrate dry wounds
    - Often use for burn and partial thickness wounds

- Wounds with heavy bioburden
  - Most dressings have silver option
    - Silver gel, silver alginate
  - Silver is a natural antimicrobial
  - Used to reduce local bioburden
  - Does not replace need for antibiotic
Management
Nutrition Support

• Malnutrition can slow tissue repair
• Correct identified deficiencies
• Ensure adequate calorie and protein intake
  • > 30 calories/kg/day
  • > 1.5 grams protein/kg/day
• Multi- vitamin/mineral supplements not supported by evidence

Management
Surgical Options

• Direct closure
  • skin grafting
  • Flaps – skin, musculocutaneous, free flaps
• Does not correct underlying cause
• High rate of recurrence
• Must undergo anesthesia
• Comorbid conditions that lead to ulcer often exclude surgical option
Management
Surgical Options
Wound Clinics

- Discrete clinics specializing in wound care
- Staffed by certified physicians
- Highly structured treatment plan
  - Proven systematic approach
  - Management of comorbid conditions
  - Management of debridement and dressings
- Will follow patient regularly until healed

Take home points

- Identifying high-risk patients is the key to prevention and early detection
- Pressure ulcers can lead to serious morbidity and mortality
- Unrelieved pressure, excessive moisture, friction and shear must be minimized
- Do not hesitate to refer to a wound clinic