



Skin Care

What is a pressure area?

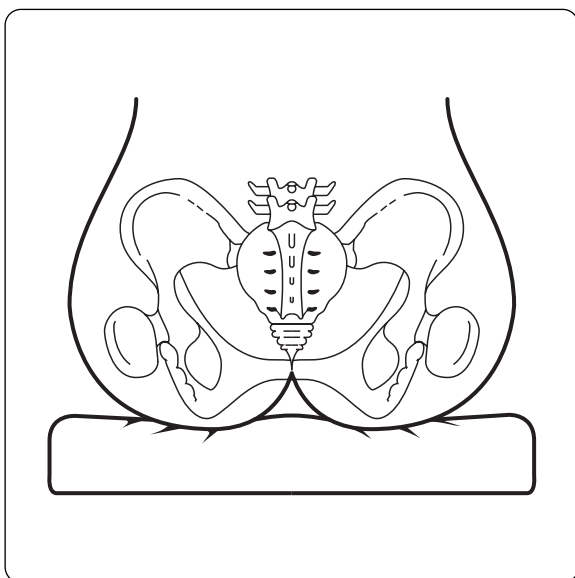
A pressure area is damage to the skin caused by pressure, shear, friction and or a combination of these. Pressure is the most common cause of pressure areas. With gravity and body weight putting pressure on the skin, the soft tissue is compressed between the bones and the skin surface. The blood vessels become squashed and blood flow to that area is interrupted. If the pressure is not relieved, it causes tissue death and results in skin breakdown or a sore.

Shearing occurs when the skin is fixed to a surface and the underlying tissue moves (e.g. when you sit up in bed, you tend to slide down causing a shearing force to the skin on your buttocks, tailbone and heels). This damages the blood vessels and can cause tissue death.

Friction occurs when the skin is rubbed or is dragged against a surface (e.g. leg spasms in bed causing heel to rub). This can lead to blistering of the skin and superficial skin breakdown.

The first sign of a pressure area is some discolouration of the skin (which may be pink or red) or a change in the texture of the skin.

↓ DIAGRAM 1: TISSUE COMPRESSION



Why is my skin at risk?

If you watch people when they are sitting or lying down, you will notice that nobody sits perfectly still for very long. We are constantly shifting our position because we get uncomfortable if we are in the same position for too long. People with a spinal injury may not be able to feel this discomfort and may have difficulty moving to relieve pressure.

You may be at increased risk of developing a pressure area if you are bony or thin, have frequent bowel or bladder accidents, spend prolonged periods on the commode, perspire a lot, are unwell or have ill-fitting or inappropriate equipment.

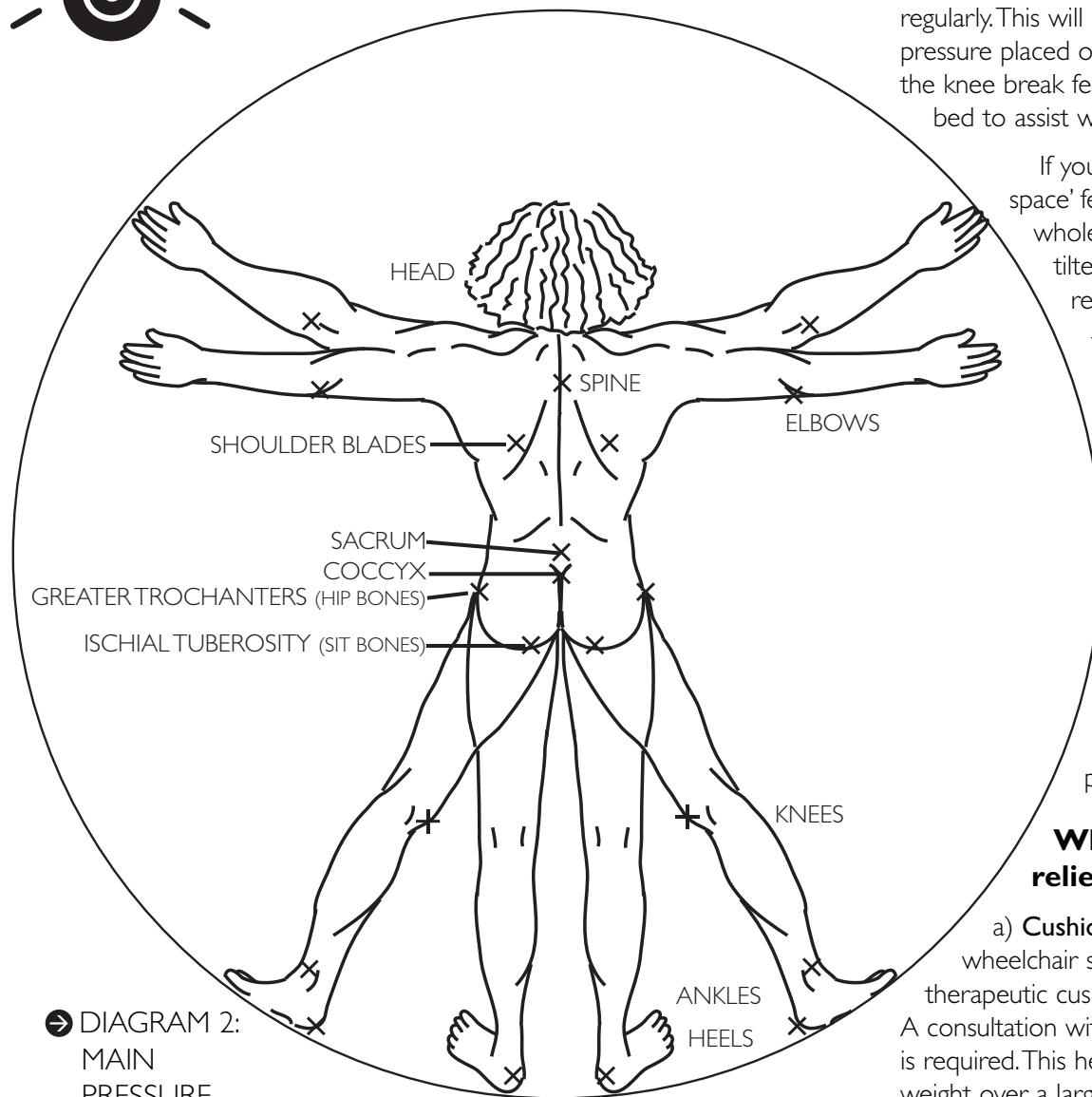
Everyone will have a different level of skin tolerance or amount of time that they can spend in one position without getting red marks or a pressure area. Skin tolerance may also change as any of the above factors change.

Where are my pressure points?

When you are sitting or lying down, pressure is placed on several bony points, and these will change depending on the position you are in. The most common pressure points are marked on the diagram overleaf (Diagram 2: Main Pressure Points) which highlights the common areas of skin breakdown.

How can I minimise the risk of developing a pressure area?

- Check your skin regularly – at least twice a day, in the morning and evening. If you are unable to do this yourself, a carer should assist you
- Keep your skin dry and clean – following showers and after any bowel or bladder accidents
- Maintain good posture. Sitting with your bottom well back, with your spine reasonably straight and footplates at correct height, allows the pressure to be more evenly distributed. If you allow your bottom to slide forward, more pressure will be exerted on your tailbone and you will be at risk of developing a pressure area



➔ **DIAGRAM 2:
MAIN
PRESSURE
POINTS**

- Relieve pressure as often as you can. You may need some help to do this. The most common pressure relieving methods are:
 1. The pressure 'lift'; using your arms, lift your bottom and hold it up for 15-20 seconds. If you are not strong enough to lift your bottom completely off the seat, you may still be able to partially relieve the pressure
 2. The pressure 'lean' – shift your weight to one side, relieving pressure on the opposite buttock. Hold this position for 15-20 seconds and repeat in the opposite direction.
 3. Alternatively you can lean forward towards your thighs, from your buttocks to relieve pressure on your buttocks. This can be done independently or with the assistance of a carer.

When in bed, make sure that you turn regularly. This will reduce the amount of pressure placed on one particular area. Use the knee break feature if you have an electric bed to assist with positioning.

If your wheelchair has a 'tilt-in space' feature (which allows the whole seat and backrest to be tilted backwards), tilt back to relieve pressure.

Take care not to damage your skin when moving around or transferring.

A healthy diet with increased vitamin C and zinc may help a pressure area to heal more quickly.

It is essential to use appropriate pressure relieving techniques and devices to avoid any pressure problems.

What about pressure relieving equipment?

a) **Cushions** – everybody who uses a wheelchair should sit on a prescribed therapeutic cushion.

A consultation with a specialist seating expert is required. This helps to spread your body weight over a larger surface area and distributes pressure more evenly

b) **Mattresses** – some people can tolerate a normal mattress, while others will require additional protection such as pressure relieving mattress overlays or pressure relieving mattresses that replace your existing mattress.

An occupational therapist from ParaQuad NSW can help you decide which cushion or mattress is best suited to you.

TIP: No matter how good a cushion or mattress is it does not replace the need for pressure relieving techniques.

Regular maintenance and care of your equipment is essential. Not only will you prolong the life of the equipment, but you will reduce the risk of skin breakdown from faulty or neglected equipment. Cushions and mattresses should be reviewed regularly and some foam cushions and mattresses should be changed yearly.

What do I do if I notice a red mark on my skin?

- It is essential to stay off the area until the skin has healed. This may mean total bedrest. Do not continue to sit on a red, broken, hard or swollen area. Continued pressure will prevent the area from healing and will probably make it break down further.

After the area has healed, it is important to slowly reintroduce pressure to that area.

- A red mark that turns white when gently pressed means that there is still a blood supply to the area; however this area cannot be ignored
- If you develop a red mark, take a note of its location, whether or not it turns white when touched, and how long it takes to fade
- Contact a community health nurse for review and management
- If the mark does not fade completely within 20-30mins, or the skin does not turn white when touched, this means that skin damage definitely has occurred
- **It is essential to stay off the area until the red mark goes away.** Do not continue to sit on red, broken, hard or swollen skin
- Remember if you go on complete bed rest you will need to set up your environment and organise some extra help to assist you to attend to your care.

You may need a better mattress to prevent further skin breakdown on other areas

- Try and determine the cause of the problem as soon as possible, to avoid it happening again
- Talk to a therapist at ParaQuad NSW, your local community nurse, doctor or other health professional
- **After the area has healed, it is important to slowly re-introduce pressure to that area. If too much pressure is placed on the area too soon, it may break down again.**

A ParaQuad therapist can assist you to design a gradual return to seating plan.

DIAGRAM 3: FORWARD LEAN

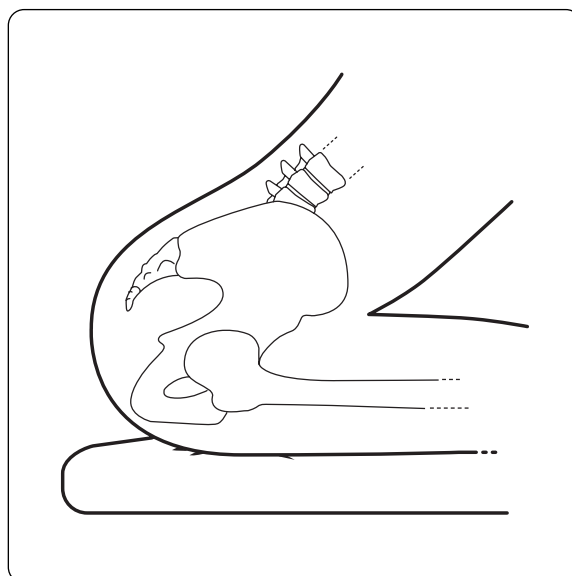


DIAGRAM 4: PRESSURE LEAN

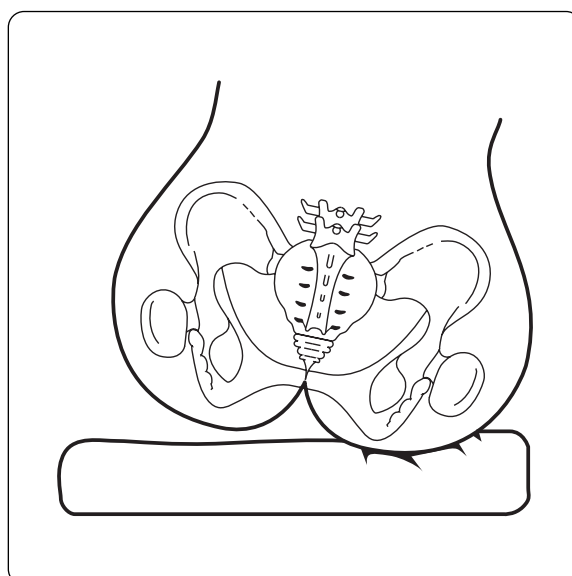
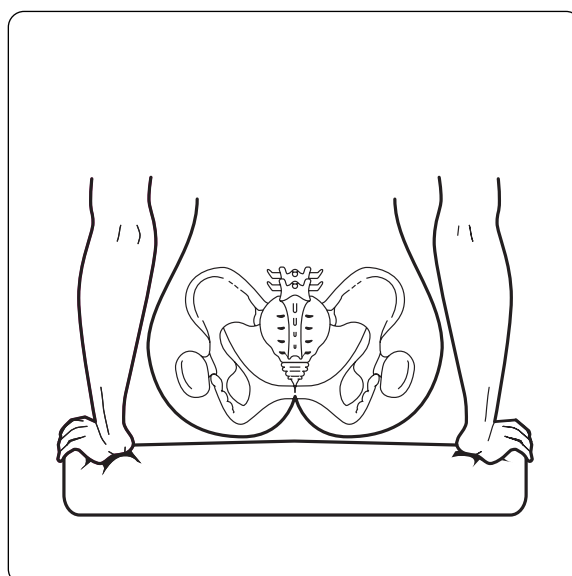


DIAGRAM 5: PRESSURE LIFT





Further information

For information regarding pressure-relieving equipment contact:

- Contact ParaQuad NSW
- Freecall: **1800 424 096** (*outside Metropolitan Sydney*)
- Clinical Services Intake/Information Officer
.....**02 8741 5674**
- Your physiotherapist
- Your occupational therapist
- A member of the Spinal Outreach Service (SOS)
.....**02 9334 0400**
- Contact the **Seating Clinic** at:
 - Prince of Wales**02 9382 5019/5206**
 - Moorong Spinal Unit**02 9808 9292**
- Independent Living Centre**02 9334 0400**
.....**www.ilcnsw.asn.au**

For information regarding pressure marks or sores contact:

- Contact ParaQuad NSW
- Freecall: **1800 424 096** (*outside Metropolitan Sydney*)
- Clinical Services Intake/Information Officer
.....**02 8741 5674**
- Your local doctor
- Your dietician
- A member of the Spinal Outreach Service (SOS)
.....**02 9334 0400**
- Local community nursing service
- Contact the **Seating Clinic** at:
 - Royal North Shore Spinal Plastics
Outpatients Clinic (SPOC) ...**02 9926 7973**
 - Prince of Wales Spinal Pressure Care
Clinic (SPCC)**02 9382 4723**