



## Skin Care for Individuals with Spina Bifida



### Introduction...Things You Should Know About Skin

**S**kin is very important. It is the largest organ of the body. In order for skin to protect your body, it must be kept whole. This newsletter gives suggestions and reminders to help you take care of your skin and keep it healthy. *Remember...even if you can't feel your skin, it is still doing its job of protecting you.* Make good skin care part of your daily routine...

- Skin is the largest organ of the body.
- Skin must last a lifetime.
- Skin protects your body against infection.
- Skin can mend itself.
- Skin holds everything else together.
- Skin grows.

### Insensate Skin...Daily Care for Legs

Some people cannot feel certain areas of their skin when touched. This is because the nerve pathways to the brain are interrupted. This can involve a small area, large area, or a whole portion of the body. Characteristics of insensate skin include:

- Does not feel pain, heat, cold.
- Poor circulation.
- Heals slowly.
- Inefficient sweating.
- Bruises easily.

**I**n caring for your skin, you should...

- Inspect feet/legs daily for bruises/cuts and red marks.
- Inspect feet weekly for calluses (thickened layer of skin on your feet). While bathing, use a pumice stone to gently smooth away the hardened layer of "old" skin. This should be done carefully, over several days to avoid irritating the "new" skin underneath.
- Follow a daily home exercise program to improve circulation.
- Keep body weight on the thinner side.
- Drink lots of water (6-8 glasses per day) to keep skin well hydrated.
- Use a mirror to check back and buttocks daily for any sign of redness or breakdown.
- Wear socks and shoes at all times.

**I**n caring for your skin, you should not...

- Walk in bare feet.
- Swim in bare feet.

## Daily Bathroom Routine

**Hygiene...**

- Take a daily shower or bath.
- Check temperature of bath water with the inside of your forearm before entry.
- Use a non-skid bathmat.
- Use only soap and water (other specialty products may be drying or irritating).
- Dry off well, especially "seat" and toes.
- Check skin using a mirror.
- Check toes, and check between toes.
- Cut toenails carefully with a clipper.
- If using a hair dryer, do not rest it in lap, so as not to burn legs.

**Bowel and Bladder...**

- Do not sit in soiled clothing.
- Change out of wet and/or soiled clothing/underwear/diapers immediately.
- Practice good hygiene with soap and water after bowel movements.
- Dry well after each change.
- Check for urine rash and burn on skin.

## Sitting

Look before you sit. Prevent skin problems by planning ahead.

**You should...**

- Use adequate cushion padding on all hard surfaces, including chairs, benches, concrete, steps.
- Use thermal protection pad on lap and thighs when cooking.
- Do five wheelchair pushups every hour to relieve pressure caused by sitting.

**You should not...**

- Place hot foods, liquids, curling iron, hair dryer, microwave dishes on lap!

## Bone Sprains

A bone sprain can be a crack, fracture, or break. It can happen without you knowing it! It may occur during activities such as bathing, catching leg on foot rests, dropping or dangling leg while transferring, and/or rolling over in bed.

### Watch for these signs...

- Skin hot in a localized area.
- Skin flushed over a joint.
- Swollen area.
- Low-grade fever.
- Area of leg "looks different."
- Range of motion feels different.

*If any of these signs are present, you or your child needs to be seen by a physician.*

### Plan of care...

Treatment for a bone sprain may include the following plan:

- X-rays are taken before treatment. Break, fracture, or crack may or may not be seen on x-ray.
- Usual treatment is immobilization of area using braces or splints until healed.
- Healing is often fast in children.
- Frequent skin checks are needed if casted or braced (every 4 hours).
- Frequent toe checks for swelling or discoloration are needed if casted or braced (every 4 hours).
- Frequent physician visits may be needed.
- Frequent x-rays may be needed.

## Skin Marks

Insensate skin needs extra care and attention.

### Watch out for...

• blisters	• rashes	• red marks
• flea/bug bites	• bruises	• burns
• scratches	• abrasions	• rug burns
• sunburn	• pressure ulcers	• calluses
All of the above can become open sores within a matter of hours unless pressure on the area is eliminated.		

### **Causes include...**

- Ill-fitting braces.
- Shoes.
- Wheelchair.
- Hasty transfers.

## **Skin Ulcers / Breakdown**

Ulcers occur when the skin is bruised, cut, scraped, or if circulation is diminished. If you notice a "red" mark on an area of your skin, remove whatever may be causing pressure to that area of your body and/or change your position. If the red mark persists, follow up right away with a health care provider (MD, RN, physical therapist, orthotist, etc.).

### **Things that may compound poor circulation...**

- Obesity.
- Inactivity.
- Ill-fitting wheelchair / worn cushion / braces / shoes.

### **Basic care of pressure ulcers...**

- Keep weight off the affected area.
- Do not wear braces if there are sores on legs and feet.
- Leave area open to the air if the ulcer/blister is superficial.
- Protect area well from added trauma.
- Use adequate thickness of cushion for body weight.
- Keep skin clean and dry. Use good hygiene.
- Routinely do 5 wheelchair pushups every hour.
- Elevate legs if that is where the pressure is located to improve circulation.
- Notify your therapist, nurse, and/or physician about the problem.

## **Clothing**

- Wear loose-fitting clothing on legs.
- Avoid tight elastic bands, especially at waist and ankles.
- Wear cotton and/or wool socks.
- Make sure all toes are out straight and not curled under in shoes.
- Wear shoes and socks at all times, including specialty pool footwear.

## **Mobility**

- Wear long pants, socks, and shoes for crawling. Avoid concrete.
- Avoid radiators, hot water pipes, and baseboards (can burn skin).
- Use caution when moving around kerosene stoves and space heaters (can burn skin).

- Crawl, walk, and/or push wheelchair carefully around kerosene or electric heaters (can start a fire).
- Ask for help carrying hot cocoa, soup, or food, especially in a wheelchair (hot liquids can burn legs).
- Check seat and buckles of wheelchair for heat/cold.
- Foot struck while transferring can cause skin breakdown or bone sprain.
- Bare feet can be harmed with hot or cold wheelchair footrests.
- Wheelchair seat belts can burn thighs, especially when wearing shorts.

## School

**In addition to routine skin care, you will need...**

- Extra set of clothes to change, if wet.
- Spare equipment as needed (i.e., ostomy bag changes).
- Spare catheters if on intermittent catheterization program.
- Good hygiene practices.
- You may ask to use nurse's room for better privacy and accessibility.

## Cold Weather

- Wear protective clothing, including hats, gloves, mittens, long johns, wool/cotton socks outside in cold weather.
- Wear boots in rain and snow (over braces and shoes).
- Remove wet socks *immediately*.

## Hot Weather

- Drink water - at least 4 oz./hour.
- Wear sun hat because body overheats.
- Wear sunscreen at all times.
- Wear sunblock on legs (particularly on the skin usually covered by braces).
- Wear insect repellent to avoid bites.
- Avoid poison ivy and poison sumac (scratching can cause infections).
- Avoid hot playground equipment.
- Be cautious with sand; it is abrasive to feet and legs.
- Swings and picnic benches can pinch skin.
- Wear shoes at all times.

## Swimming

- Wear swim shoes/water socks at all times - indoor and outdoor pools.
- Never walk on cement in bare feet.
- Wear socks and sneakers on beach.
- Put a towel on the concrete edge of the pool before sitting.
- Cover hot wheelchair or sitting area with towel first.
- Dry feet carefully after swimming.
- Put on dry socks and shoes.

## Hospital

**During hospitalizations, continue to take care of your skin...**

- Special air mattress.
- Heel protectors while in bed.
- Drink water.
- Watch for red marks from hospital sheets.
- Keep to usual skin care routine as much as possible.
- Maximize mobility.

## Day Trips

**Carry the following...**

- Plenty of water to drink.
- Toilet needs.
- Sunscreen.
- Medications.
- Emergency phone numbers (know how to use phone for collect call).
- Change (at least 50¢) for telephone.
- Identification (name, address, phone numbers, medications).
- Medic-Alert information.
- Cushion to sit on.
- Clothing:
  - appropriate for hot/cold weather.
  - dress in layers to adjust for changes in temperature throughout the day (weather may get warmer by lunchtime, cooler in evening).
  - extra set of clothes (accidents).
  - extra set of dry socks.

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