

Compression Dressings

What are compression dressings (bandages)?

A compression dressing is used to treat venous stasis ulcers (leg wounds caused by damaged or weak veins). Bandages are applied from above your toes to below your knee. Some dressings have 3 layers, others have 4 layers. The bandages compress (squeeze) the leg and help your blood flow up the veins and toward the heart. They are put on by a doctor or nurse, and usually are changed once a week. **You cannot change these bandages by yourself.**



What about compression stockings?

Many people know about special compression ('support') socks and stockings that you can get in the pharmacy. They may go from your toes to your knees or thighs. They come in different pressures, to squeeze your legs as much or as little as you need. Some of these stockings can be bought without a prescription, but tighter ones need to be prescribed by a doctor. Stockings can also help patients with poor vein circulation, even if they do not have a wound. They do not work as well as compression dressings.

Can compression dressings hurt me?

Most people do not have any problems from compression dressings. People with blocked arteries in their legs should not use compression bandages, because they can lessen blood flow to the leg. We test all patients for blocked arteries, and do not prescribe compression bandages unless we know that it is safe to do so.

If the dressing is too tight, you may have pain in the legs or swelling of the feet. **If you have pain or swelling, call your doctor or go to the emergency room immediately. Do not take the bandages off yourself.**

Who will change my dressing?

Your doctor or nurse will change the dressing. At home, visiting nurses will change it. If you live in a nursing home, the nurses there may change them.

How do I take care of my compression dressing?

While your compression dressing is on:

Look and feel for skin irritations at the bandage edges. Look for redness, swelling, burning, itching or cracking.

Avoid scratching under the dressing with any objects.

Keep your dressing dry. Cover it with a plastic bag when you take a shower or if you are out in the rain. Make sure the bag does not leak. Clean between your toes with a damp cloth after showering.



Elevate your leg as much as possible. Put your leg on a chair or stool that is higher than the chair where you are sitting. Elevate your leg 6 to 12 inches above your hips when you are lying down.

Exercise your calf (leg) muscles by walking. The calf muscles help pump the blood out of the leg and back to the heart.

Do not wear nail polish on the toes of the foot while the bandage is on. You need to be able to see if the nail bed has changed color. If the nail bed changes from pink to dark purple or black, the bandages may be too tight.

Place gauze over any areas of the wound that drain (leak) through the bandage. Change these gauze dressings as needed.

What else do I need to know?

You will need a larger shoe to allow the bandage to fit into it. This must be a low-heeled, lace-up shoe that gives good support. If you have been given a cast shoe, be sure to wear it when walking.

Never decorate or write on your compression bandage.

Never cut or remove any part of your bandage. This could interfere with your circulation and prevent healing.

Your bandage will be changed once or twice a week, until your ulcer is healed. If your wound has a lot of drainage (liquid), the bandage may become too soiled to keep on for an entire week. If this happens, you may need dressing changes twice, or even three times a week. Talk with your doctor about this.

After the bandage is removed by your nurse or doctor, they may apply lotion to dry skin, clean open ulcers and apply another compression bandage.

Your doctor or nurse may have other special instructions for you.

Call your doctor or go to an emergency room if:

- the bandage becomes too tight or too loose
- you have new or increased pain or pressure
- the toes below the bandage become swollen, discolored (reddish or purple or white), painful, cold, numb or hard to move
- you have a temperature higher than 101° F



What do I do if I have a question?

If you are confused or have a question about your compression dressing, please call us at 212.932.4325, at any time. You can also find information at our website: www.ColumbiaWoundHealing.org.

This information is brief and general. It should not be the only source of your information on this health care topic. It is not to be used or relied on for diagnosis or treatment. It does not take the place of instructions from your doctor. Talk to your health care providers before making a health care decision.