

# ACTION UPDATE! Update 1: Ulcers

Fold 3

## Groundswell's Action Updates

Groundswell's Peer Advocates support homeless people to attend over 1,400 health appointments a year. Each month our **Action Updates** highlight a topic which homeless people have told us is important and offer practical advice around the issue. The guidance and quotes are based on what our Peer Advocates see first hand when working with homeless people to improve health.

Fold 1

- Help to make health appointments
  - Go with you to your health appointments
  - Pay for your travel fares if needed.
- Find out more at: [www.groundswell.org.uk](http://www.groundswell.org.uk)  
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## Key facts on Ulcers

- A leg ulcer is a long-lasting sore on your leg or foot that takes more than four to six weeks to heal.
- Leg ulcers are caused by poor blood circulation which puts pressure on veins.
- Ulcers can be very painful making it hard to walk.
- Ulcers can easily become infected and lead to larger issues including the need for leg amputation



A Groundswell client's leg ulcer! With treatment it has now almost healed.

## Leg Ulcers — Groundswell's Experience

We know from our work that leg ulcers are one of the most common health problems faced by people that we work with.

In the year up to August 2015, 12% of Groundswell's appointments were for dressing changes due to ulcers.

They need continued treatment with up to 3 dressings changes a week—but getting to the appointments is often made difficult by the mobility issues caused by the ulcers. For 68% of dressings change appointments we recorded that the client had mobility problems often caused by their ulcers.

However, the appointments for dressing changes don't take long (averaging 1hour 10minutes door to door)—and it's essential to get to them. 95% of dressing changes appointments were completed with the help of Groundswell Homeless Health Peer Advocates.

## Groundswell

Groundswell exists to enable homeless and vulnerable people to take more control of their lives, have a greater influence on services and to play a full role in our community.

## Homeless Health Peer Advocacy

Groundswell works to improve the health of homeless people. Peer Advocates, who have been homeless themselves, can go with you to physical health appointments to help you to get the best service from the NHS. Practically we can offer you:

- Help to make health appointments
- Go with you to your health appointments
- Pay for your travel fares if needed.

# ACTION UPDATE!

## Update 1: Ulcers

Ulcers are thoroughly unpleasant things to have — but there are steps you can take to avoid getting them and they can heal fully if you stick to your treatment. Here's the things you need to know.

### Symptoms

- Swelling, colour change and hardening of the skin
- a heavy feeling in your legs
- flaky skin on your legs
- swollen veins on your legs
- a smelly discharge from a wound

*"With Ulcers you can see the pain in our client's faces."*

If you spot any of these symptoms you may have an ulcer. It's important to get medical help as they won't heal on their own and treatment should be carried out by a trained professional.

*"I had three people lose their leg in the same week. They still feel they have got a leg when it's not there."*

### Consequences

Ulcers can be very painful and make it hard to walk. Some people even end up losing their legs. They are also very smelly and can easily get infected leading to further problems.

Treatment can be very effective – for most people who complete treatment and make changes to their lifestyle they will heal completely. But if you miss dressing changes and don't make changes to the root causes of the problem such as injecting drugs, the consequences can be life changing.

### Causes

Ulcers are caused by poor blood circulation. This means that veins are under a lot of pressure and even a small injury can result in an ulcer forming. **Ulcers affect around 1 in 500 people in the UK but are much more common amongst people who inject drugs** because of the harm caused to blood circulation and injuries to the injection site.

### Prevention

- Elevating your legs can improve circulation
- Regular exercise
- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Use compression stockings if you have poor circulation

*"Missing dressing changes sets you back so long—you have just got to miss a few and it ends up going bad quite quickly. So all the treatment you have had for months on end has gone to waste."*

### Treatment

If you get an ulcer it's incredibly important that you seek medical treatment— and see it through to completion!

Treatment usually involves cleaning and dressing the wound, then using compression bandages to improve the flow of blood in the legs. Antibiotics may also be used if the ulcer becomes infected, but they do not help uninfected ulcers heal. **Treatment should always be carried out by a health care professional trained in compression therapy for leg ulcers.**

### Safer Injecting Top Tips

**If you inject the best thing you can do to prevent ulcers is to stop injecting!**

**If not, you can limit the damage by rotating injection sites and avoiding injecting in your groin.**

**Five Golden Rules of Safer Injecting:**

- **Always use your own injecting equipment including spoons, filters, water, needles and syringes**
- **Don't lend or borrow injecting equipment from anybody (including sexual partners)**
- **Use the smallest bore needle as possible**
- **Don't inject alone**
- **Use your own equipment only once and dispose of it safely**



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