

# Tissue Viability Services

Patient information leaflet

Fungating wounds



If you have any  
questions or  
concerns contact  
your community  
nurses via the Single  
Point of Access (SPA)  
on 0300 300 7777

## What are fungating cancer wounds?

Fungating cancer wounds may also be called malignant or ulcerating wounds. A fungating wound is when cancer that is growing under the skin breaks through the skin to create a wound.

As the cancer grows, it blocks and damages tiny blood vessels, which can starve the area of oxygen. This causes the skin and underlying tissue to die (necrosis). There may also be infection, and areas of the wound may become ulcerated.

Fungating wounds are rare, and most people who have cancer will never develop one.

If however you do develop a fungating wound, it might be in the same area as the primary cancer (where the cancer started) or where the secondary cancer or metastasis is (when the cancer has spread to another part of the body).

If a fungating wound does develop, it's most likely to happen with breast cancer, head and neck cancer or melanoma.

Fungating wounds are diagnosed by your GP, specialist nurse or consultant.



## Symptoms of a fungating cancer wounds

People often find that they have several symptoms at the same time. The most common symptoms of a fungating wound include:

- leakage or discharge
- an unpleasant smell
- pain
- bleeding
- itching.

## Some helpful tips for fungating cancer wounds

Sometimes one of the most difficult things to deal with is where the wound is situated. Wounds may appear in awkward positions - for example, in the armpit or on the face/neck - and so it can be difficult to find the right size and shape of dressing, and the best way of securing it. In these situations, trying different ways of holding the wound dressing in place can be helpful.

Some people may find that tubifast garments (a type of clothing bandage) helps keep on the dressings. Clothing containing lycra, such as crop tops, t-shirt vests or cycling shorts, may also help hold a dressing in the right position under clothing.

You may also find it useful to have extra supplies of dressings, especially at holiday times, or have towels/protective sheeting that will protect your bed at night.



## Controlling symptoms of fungating cancer wounds

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Your nurses will do all they can to minimise the way the wound affects your daily life. They may ask for the advice of a specialist nurse in wound care, often called a Tissue Viability Nurse.

When suffering with a fungating wound it is important to have regular reviews with your nurses so they may evaluate your dressing regime and provide prompt advice/support. An appropriate assessment and implementation of the correct treatment can reduce risk of infection.

## Itching

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Itching can be an ongoing problem. It is caused when the skin is stretched and nerve endings are irritated. Unfortunately, this type of irritation does not tend to respond well to tablets that normally help relieve itching, such as antihistamines. However, things that may help relieve the itching include: good hygiene techniques such as cleansing the surrounding tissue with sterile or lukewarm tap water (depending on advice from your health care professional) and gently drying, the application of barrier films/cream to soothe the surrounding tissue. Emollient ointments may be useful however they could affect the adhesive of the dressing working effectively. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and corticosteroid creams may also be helpful.

If you are allergic to any dressings or adhesives, it's important to let your nurse or doctor know as this may be a cause of irritation.

## Leakage

Leakage or discharge is probably the most common symptom of a fungating wound. This can occur due to infection. Dressings that are very absorbent may be used with additional padding to help with this problem.

Some wound dressings can be left in place for a number of days, but this depends on the amount of fluid leaking from the wound and where the wound is situated. Sometimes, only the top layer of the dressing needs to be changed.

The discharge or leakage from a wound can make the healthy skin around it sore and red. It's often helpful to apply a barrier film or cream to the skin around the wound to protect it.

Often absorbent dressings can be bulky so the nurse may suggest a high absorbency, low bulk dressing for day time/ socialising and an alternative thicker product for enhanced management at night.



## Unpleasant smell

The presence of an unpleasant smell is common. It may be caused by infection, and many people find this symptom the most distressing.

A variety of different dressings may be used on the wound, which may help control an unpleasant smell. Some dressings contain silver, which can reduce the bacteria in the wound, and these can be effective in controlling the odour. These dressings are often left for a number of days, depending on the volume of leakage. Charcoal dressings also help filter any smell.

A wound swab may be performed if there are signs of clinical infection and your health care professional feels that antibiotic treatment is appropriate. An alternative treatment may be an antimicrobial dressing to reduce the bacteria within your wound. This can also help to reduce the smell.

People feel self-conscious about an unpleasant smell, particularly when in company. Air fresheners, odour neutralisers, environmental air filters and aromatherapy oils can help disguise unpleasant smells and help people feel more comfortable with friends and family.



## Bleeding

Bleeding can be caused if the tumour damages (ruptures) small blood vessels. Many people can feel alarmed by the sight of blood. However, it is common for fungating wounds to ooze blood. It is important to tell your doctor or nurse if you notice bleeding, or a change in the amount of bleeding. This will allow them to take action to reduce or stop it.

Dressings that do not stick, or non-stick inner dressings with removable outer dressings, can help reduce bleeding. Other things that may help include using fibrous dressings.

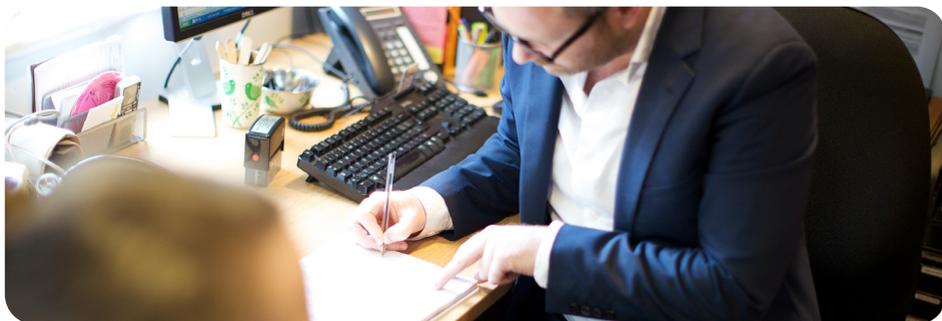
For wounds that are bleeding heavily, you may be advised to use surgical dressings that help stop bleeding (haemostatic dressings).

It is a good idea to place some dark towels to cover any excess blood to try to minimise the visual impact that it may cause.

If bleeding is unmanageable within the community you may wish to choose an inpatient setting such as a hospice or community hospital to manage your symptoms.

Other things that may help are: using non-stick dressings soaking the dressing off slowly or using medical adhesive removers.

Your health care professional may advise you to have medication within the home that can be applied to the wound to control the bleeding and/or sedative medication to ease any anxiety that this may cause.



## Pain

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Pain may be caused by the tumour damaging nerves or by dressings sticking to the skin. There are many different types of painkillers (analgesics) that can be used to help relieve pain. Taking the regular prescribed dose of painkillers may often be more helpful than taking them as required, as they may help to keep the pain away.

A doctor or nurse can give you advice about the best painkiller to use. If your pain is not being controlled, let your doctor or nurse know so that they can adjust the dose or try a different painkiller.

If the pain is worse when the dressings are changed, let your nurse know as they may be able to choose a different dressing that suits your wound better. It may also be helpful to take a short-acting painkiller just before the dressing is changed.



## Nutritional support

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Fungating wounds can leak high amounts of fluid containing vital protein the body needs and can result in dehydration therefore it is advised to increase the protein within your diet to supplement this and increase your fluid intake (unless advised differently by your health care professional).

Your health care professional may advise for you to be referred to a dietitian to be reviewed for prescribed supplements to support your diet.

## Your feelings

Fungating cancer wounds can cause many feelings, including anxiety, embarrassment and depression. Many people feel isolated and worry about leaving the house. They may be worried or embarrassed if they have a wound that affects their outward appearance, or if the wound has an unpleasant smell. It can also be demanding on relationships as people can feel very aware of the wound on their body. You will probably be much more aware of the wound than other people. You and your nurse can decide on the most acceptable and comfortable way to dress your wound.

Some people find complementary therapies such as relaxation or aromatherapy helpful. Others find it helpful to talk things over with their doctor/consultant or nurse. Family and close friends may also be able to offer support by informing them of the situation.

Your specialist palliative nurse will also discuss the option of being referred to a counselling support service.



## Planning your care in advance

One way of making people aware of your wishes is by planning your care in advance, you and your relatives/carers (if appropriate) can talk with your GP about completing an agreed Advanced Care Plan. As part of this you may wish to record what your preferences and wishes for future care and treatment might be.



## Support Services

If you are unable to make contact with these services please contact SPA 0300 300 7777 and speak with your Nurse Specialist or District Nursing Team.

### **Macmillian Cancer Support** - Tel: 0808 808 00 00

Understanding, diagnosing, organising, treating, coping, resources and benefits advice for people with cancer and carers.

Email: Via website [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

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### **Coping with Cancer** - Tel: 0116 250 2026

Services are free to any individual affected by cancer, including family, friends and carers. Provides practical and emotional support.

Email: [info@copingwithcancer.org.uk](mailto:info@copingwithcancer.org.uk)  
[www.copingwithcancer.org.uk](http://www.copingwithcancer.org.uk)

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### **Mind** - Tel: 0300 123 3393 or Text 86463

We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk) [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

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### **Willow Support Foundation** (for Adults 16-40) -

Tel: 01707259777

Special Days for seriously ill young adults

Email: [info@willowfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@willowfoundation.org.uk)  
[www.willowfoundation.org.uk](http://www.willowfoundation.org.uk)

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### **HoneyRose Foundation** (for Adults 40+) - Tel: 01744 451919

Helps grant special wishes to adults

Email: [kerri@honeyrosefoundation.org.uk](mailto:kerri@honeyrosefoundation.org.uk)  
[www.honeyrosefoundation.org.uk](http://www.honeyrosefoundation.org.uk)

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### **Children with Cancer UK** - Tel: 0800 222 9000

Provides education and supports families to help them navigate life through treatment and beyond.

Email: [info@childrenwithcancer.org.uk](mailto:info@childrenwithcancer.org.uk)  
[www.childrenwithcancer.org.uk](http://www.childrenwithcancer.org.uk)

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### **Integrated Community Specialist Palliative Care** -

Tel: 0300 300 7777

## References

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NHS (2013) Deciding Right, planning your care in advance, a guide.

Macmillan (2013) Fungating wounds Accessed online, [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk). 12th October 2015

A special thank you to Macmillian Cancer Support for allowing us to adapt the information outlined in their patient information leaflet.



**If you need help to understand this leaflet or would like it in a different language or format such as large print, Braille or audio, please ask a member of staff.**

Date implemented: November 2016  
Last reviewed: August 2023  
Review date: August 2025  
Leaflet No. 388 Edition 2