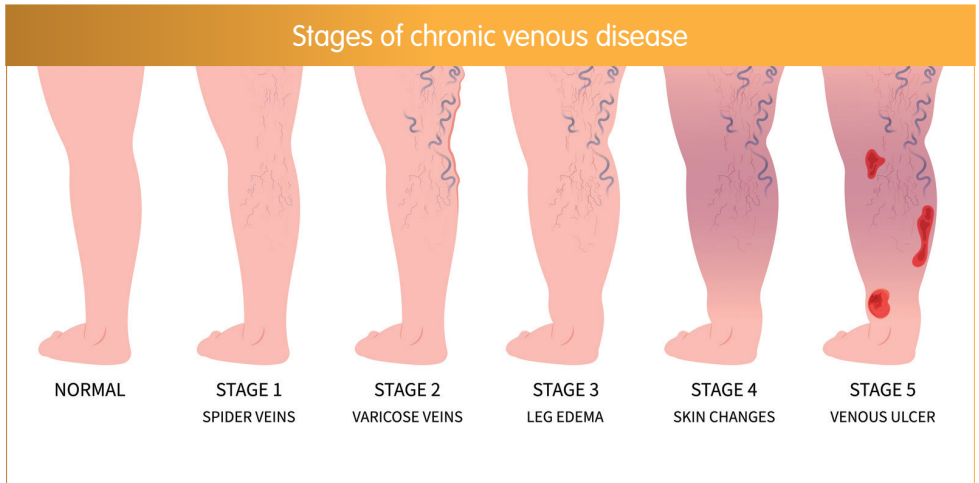


# I have a venous leg ulcer: what has caused it?

If you have been told that you have a venous leg ulcer, it is important that you understand what that means. Here, we explain what causes venous leg ulceration and explain why it is a long-term condition that needs ongoing management.

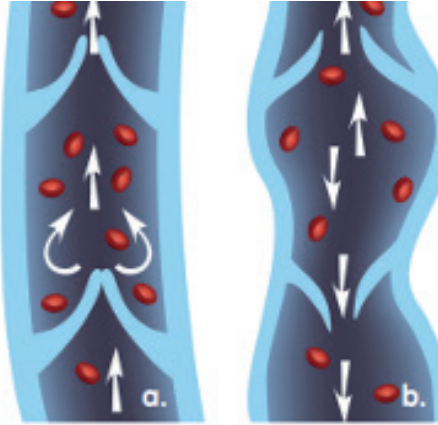


**A** venous leg ulcer is described as a break in the skin below the knee, which has not healed within two weeks. Usually, venous leg ulcers (VLU) occur around the ankle to mid-calf area. If you have a wound in this area of your leg, it is most likely to be a venous leg ulcer as this is the most common, accounting for approximately 60–80% of lower-limb wounds.

## What causes a VLU?

Venous leg ulcers arise due to underlying venous disease. Venous disease means that there is a problem with the veins in your legs. Usually this is a problem with a faulty valve in your vein.

The main veins in the body return deoxygenated blood back to the heart. In the legs and feet, blood must travel upwards against the pull of gravity. To



help with this, the veins have a series of one-way valves to help transport the blood upwards against gravity from the lower limbs (known as venous return) and prevent it from flowing backwards (see picture a). The foot and calf muscles also help in the movement of blood by squeezing the vein (like toothpaste in a tube) when they contract on movement, sending blood upwards to the heart.

However, if for any reason the valves become faulty, for example, as a result of age or an accident or surgery, they don't work effectively and blood can flow backwards in the vein, where it begins to pool (see picture b). This pooling causes the vein to expand, like a balloon filled with water. This is the cause of varicose veins. If this process continues over time, it can result in an increase in the blood pressure within the vein in the leg, known as venous hypertension.

Pooling and increased blood pressure can force blood and fluid into the skin and tissues of the leg, causing congestion. With time, this can lead to skin changes, including purple or rust-coloured discolouration of the skin known as haemosiderin staining, the presence of dry, flaky skin known as hyperkeratosis, and swelling. Eventually, the tissue changes make the skin fragile and vulnerable to damage, and a wound appears.

### Risk factors for venous leg ulcers

Any condition that increases the pressure in the veins of the lower limb, or results in damaged valves, can put you at an increased risk of developing a venous leg ulcer. Risk factors include:

- Being obese or overweight
- Problems with mobility
- A previous blood clot in the veins of the leg (deep vein thrombosis/DVT)
- Varicose veins
- Previous leg injury, e.g. fractured bone
- Family history
- Pregnancy.

As a venous leg ulcer is a sign of underlying venous disease, it requires long-term management. Even when your wound is healed, the risk of it recurring is still there, because of the underlying condition. For this reason, a venous leg ulcer can be thought of as a chronic condition that needs ongoing care to maintain your limb health. You can read how to care for your venous leg ulcer in more detail on pages 8–9.