

Fact Sheet

Pressure Ulcers Among People With Spinal Cord Injury in South Carolina: Estimates and Health Impacts.



Why Pressure Ulcers Matter: A Closer Look at the Impact in South Carolina

- In South Carolina, nearly 1 in 4 people with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) (27%) had at least one open ulcer in the past year. See figure 1.
- These ulcers often result in long recovery times, multiple hospitalizations, surgeries and loss of independence.
- Barriers such as cost, transportation, and lack of assistance prevent many individuals with SCI from receiving timely treatment.

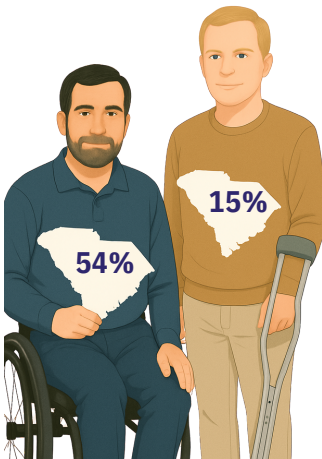
This fact sheet summarizes the scope of the problem based on our self-report study of 1,421 individuals with SCI in South Carolina, surveyed an average of five years after injury. Among those who responded, 79% were ambulatory (able to walk), while 21% were not. The findings highlight the need for prevention, early detection, and better support for those affected.

Figure 1
Prevalence of Pressure Ulcers



Nearly 1 in 4 individuals with SCI (27%) had an open ulcer in the past year.

Figure 2
Pressure Ulcers by Mobility Status: Non-Walkers vs Walkers



More than half (54%) of non-walkers had a pressure ulcer in the past year, compared to 15% of walkers.

Overview

What Are Pressure Ulcers?

Pressure ulcers (also called bedsores, pressure sores, and pressure injuries) are injuries to the skin and tissue caused by staying in one position too long. They often form over bony areas like the tailbone, hips, and heels.¹

Why People With SCI Are at Risk?

People with SCI may have limited movement and reduced sensation, which makes it harder to shift positions or feel pressure.² They may also engage in behaviors that increase risk, such as sitting for long periods without doing pressure relief.

How Common Are They?

- On average, participants reported just one pressure sore in the past year, while others experienced as many as 12.
- More than half (54%) of individuals who cannot walk had a pressure ulcer in the past 12 months, compared to just 15% of those who can walk. See Figure 2
- Among participants who had at least one pressure sore in the past year, almost half (48.5%) still had an open sore at the time of their interview.

How Do Pressure Ulcers Affect Health?

If a pressure ulcer is not treated early, it can lead to serious infections like bone infection (osteomyelitis) or a life-threatening blood infection (sepsis).

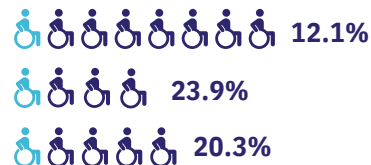
These problems often mean longer hospital stays, more pain, a spiral downturn in health, and a higher risk of death.¹

The numbers on this page are based on the 370 (27%) individuals with SCI who had at least one open ulcer in the past year.

How Long Do Pressure Ulcers Limited Sitting Time?

- 1 in 8 people (12.1%) had to reduce sitting time for **less than 1 week**.
- Nearly 1 in 4 people (23.9%) had sitting time reduced for **1 to 8 weeks**.
- 1 in 5 people (20.3%) had sitting time limited for **more than 8 weeks**.

Figure 3. Sitting Time Reduction



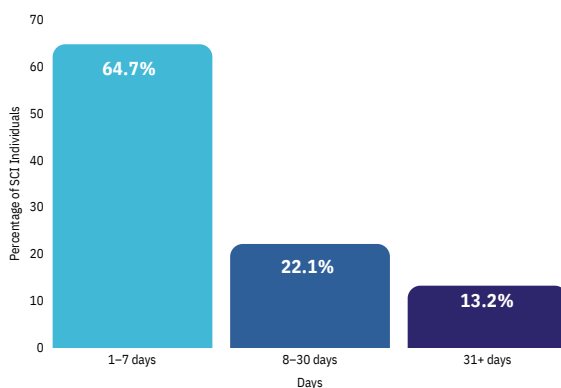
Why this matters

Pressure ulcers can limit daily activities and reduce independence. Understanding how long ulcers affect sitting can help you and your caregivers plan for care, stay engaged in healing, and seek support when needed.

Pressure Ulcers Led to Multi-Day Hospital Stays

- Among those who had at least one open pressure ulcer in the past year, 1 in 5 (20.2%) were hospitalized one or multiple times due to pressure ulcers.
- Among those hospitalized for a pressure ulcer, 2 in 3 (64.7%) individuals stayed in the hospital for 7 days or fewer. See figure 4.
- About 1 in 5 (22.1%) spent 8–30 days in the hospital, and 1 in 8 (13.2%) were hospitalized for more than a month.
- Nearly 1 in 5 people (20%) had surgery for a pressure ulcer in the past year.

Figure 4. Day Hospitalized for Pressure Ulcers



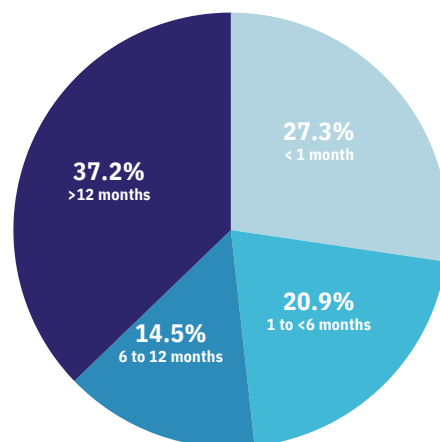
Serious Impact

These numbers highlight the significant impact pressure ulcers can have on health and the healthcare system, reinforcing the need for early intervention and consistent care.

Long-Lasting Ulcers Are Common

- Nearly 1 in 3 individuals (37.2%) reported living with the same ulcer for 12 months or more (See figure 5). This highlights how pressure ulcers can become chronic wounds that resist healing.
- About 1 in 7 people (14.5%) had an ulcer that lasted 6 to 12 months. This may reflect a slower healing stage where ongoing attention and care are still needed.
- 1 in 5 individuals (20.9%) had ulcers that lasted 1 to 6 months, a critical window for treatment to prevent complications.
- 1 in 4 individuals (27.3%) had an ulcer for less than a month, when healing is most likely if treated early.

Figure 5. Duration of Current Pressure Ulcers



Key Message

Pressure ulcers often do not heal quickly. Many people live with the same ulcer for months or even years, increasing the risk of pain, infection, and hospital stays. Early care and ongoing support are essential to healing.

Some People Missed Needed Care Due to Cost and Transportation

Among the 370 (27%) individuals with SCI who had at least one open ulcer in the year before the survey:



One in eight individuals (12%) delayed or skipped care because they lacked transportation or assistance getting to a provider.



About 1 in 11 people (9%) delayed or skipped care for a pressure ulcer because of cost or insurance issues.

The Cost of Delay

Missing care for a pressure ulcer can make the wound worse and harder to treat. Without early care, ulcers may lead to infection, hospitalization, or long-term disability.

What You Can Do to Prevent Pressure Ulcers ²



Check your skin every day, especially over bony areas like the tailbone, hips, and heels



Change your position often, every 2 hours in bed and every 30 minutes in your wheelchair



Use a pressure-relieving cushion in your wheelchair and a supportive mattress in bed



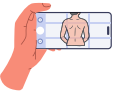
Keep your skin clean and dry by managing moisture from sweat or accidents right away



Eat enough protein and drink plenty of fluids to support skin healing.



Avoid smoking, as it reduces blood flow and slows healing. Also, avoid excess alcohol, which can cloud your judgment.



Take photos or videos with your phone to check hard-to-see areas, or ask someone you trust to help during skin checks.



Practice pressure reliefs by tilting, reclining, or lifting your body if you can



Get your cushion and mattress checked regularly to make sure they are working



Talk to your provider about help with equipment, wound supplies, or virtual appointments if getting to the clinic is difficult

Support:

This is a product of the South Carolina spinal cord injury outcomes database, which is a study of outcomes among people with spinal cord injury (SCI) in the state of South Carolina. The study was designed to help us better understand the needs of people with SCI in South Carolina and is supported by the South Carolina SCI Research Fund, grants 2017 SI-02 and 09-001. **This fact sheet is not meant to replace the advice of your physician or other healthcare provider. You should always consult your physician or healthcare provider before making changes to behavior, treatment, or use of medicine.**

References

1. Vecin NM, Gater DR. Pressure Injuries and Management after Spinal Cord Injury. *J Pers Med*. 2022;12(7):1130. Published 2022 Jul 12. doi:10.3390/jpm12071130

2. Consortium for Spinal Cord Medicine. Pressure Ulcer Prevention and Treatment Following Injury: A Clinical Practice Guideline for Health-Care Providers. 2nd ed. *Paralyzed Veterans of America*; 2014.

Links to Resources:

[Health, Employment, & Longevity Project](#)

[Pressure Injury Calculator](#)

[Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center](#)

[South Carolina Spinal Cord Injury Association](#)

[Shepherd Center](#)

[Spinalcord.com](#)