

# Leg Club update



Figure 1. Scenes from a Leg Club where members exercise together and hear about the importance of leg movement.

In 1998 Clare Horne, a Chartered Physiotherapist at East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust, carried out a successful leg exercise plan. She worked in the intensive care and surgical wards and started running exercise classes at her clinic. Her aim was to reduce the need of surgical intervention for patients who suffer from pain, tension and weakness in their legs. The classes were monitored regularly and she recorded an astonishing improvement in her patients.

By implementing, enforcing and following a structured exercise plan, we too, can see such outstanding results. — not only in the physical progress of the patients' healing, but also in their personal motivation to succeed within their individual groups at our Leg Clubs. First, we need to fully understand the benefits of exercise. This will help us to work towards the future success of the healing of our members' leg ulcers and the prevention of recurrence.

## What can be done to help prevent leg ulcers?

**Regular exercise:** the focus for our members should be to activate their calf muscles, which will help to push the blood back towards the heart. Either walking or other leg exercises can do this. Walking is one of the simplest and easiest exercises for our members to increase the blood flow in the calf muscles. If our members find it difficult to walk they can do some gentle ankle exercises while sitting, such as lifting and moving the foot and ankle in a circular motion to the right and then to the left. We provide our Leg Club members with a 'leg movement handout' with details of an exercise programme that can be followed by those with limited mobility.

Members' lifestyles may mean that they have to stand for prolonged periods of time. An exercise to help counteract the bad effects of prolonged standing would be to shift their weight from foot to foot, or stand on tiptoes and then lower back down again. Alternatively, they

## Promoting exercise for Leg Club members

There are many reasons why leg ulcers take so long to heal, such as weight issues, smoking, diabetes and other health-related issues. Despite the many factors that do delay healing it has been shown that within some of our Leg Clubs, patients who have successfully followed exercise routines both at the club and in their own time have seen improvements in the healing process.

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might be sitting for prolonged periods of time. Exercises to help these members are shown in the handout.

With regular exercise, members will improve the blood circulation in their legs. It is fine for the legs to hurt a little during exercise, but not excessively.

**Positioning of the legs:** it is important to raise the legs as much as possible. When lying on the settee, feet should be raised so that they are higher than the level of the heart. Legs and feet can be supported with pillows and the legs should not be crossed.

Arterial leg ulcers can be painful which can increase when legs are at rest and elevated. The pain of arterial leg ulcers can be reduced by sitting on the edge of a bed with feet on the floor. Gravity will then cause more blood to flow into the legs.

**Diet:** eating a healthy balanced diet and maintaining an appropriate weight for your height is important, as being overweight will put an extra strain on the veins. For overweight people losing weight will help prevent ulcers. Reducing the amount of fat that is eaten and eating more fruit and vegetables will also help.

## Preventing arterial leg ulcers

Older people are repeatedly told about the benefits of physical exercise — how it can help to lose weight, lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol levels, lower blood sugar and slow down osteoporosis. Unfortunately, practical advice is often lacking. At the Leg Club guidelines and demonstrations are used to help members understand the reasons why exercise is so important for them.

People often wonder if it is safe to start exercising at an advanced age. In fact, there are few health reasons to discourage older people from exercising. Chronic diseases such as diabetes or even heart failure, need not be a barrier

so long as they are under control. When done correctly, exercise can actually improve such conditions.

## Benefits of leg exercises

The cartilage that cushions the ends of the bones in the knee is subject to deterioration with age. As the cushion wears down, the joint does not function as well and can cause pain in the knee. Ensuring stronger leg muscles through disciplined leg exercises can protect against knee osteoarthritis. Another advantage of adding some lean muscle on the legs is a marked increase in body metabolism, which helps to burn fat off the entire body.

Making leg exercises an integral part of their lifestyle will bring long-term benefits. Strong, healthy legs complement overall well-being. Quite often, carrying out simple activities like making beds, dressing or undressing may use 50% of an elderly person's maximal physical capability. In other words, their cardiovascular ability (or aerobic capacity) has declined with age, so that exertion beyond a certain level causes a lack of adequate oxygen circulation. Aerobic capability can be increased by different types of aerobic exercise, thereby greatly improving functional ability, maintaining independence and quality of life.

A new participant starts gradually, proceeding from moderate to vigorous exercise, if their doctor approves. Members are advised to exercise through everyday activities such as mowing or raking the lawn or scrubbing floors. More vigorous types of aerobic exercises would be climbing the stairs. Whatever the activity, Leg Club members are advised to incorporate adequate warm-up and stretching routines before starting, and to ensure that they include a cool down and stretching period afterwards.

It is important to do enough aerobic exercises, but not to overdo it. There are several ways to prescribe the right

amount of endurance exercise. A simple additional check is the talk-sing test. If the person cannot talk comfortably during exercise, they are probably exercising at a too vigorous level. On the other hand, if they can sing a song, they are not really exerting themselves enough. However, it is not always best for older people to decide how hard to exercise, because many have long-standing medical conditions or take medications that change their heart rate. If this applies, ask them to check with their doctor.

Initially, people should start their exercise programme in a supervised setting. This is where a Leg Club is perfect. Club leaders can encourage members to do the exercise sheet every hour, on the hour when the club is open. One of the volunteers, administrative assistants or nurses can lead the exercises because the regimen is easy to follow. Members should stop endurance exercising promptly if they have any chest pain, dizziness, and severe shortness of breath, extreme fatigue, or pain in their legs. Ample fluids should be taken, and extremes of heat or cold should be avoided when exercising.

## What is the goal of our Leg Clubs?

The exercise programmes fit in with the general goals of the Leg Club which is to help improve the healing process of our members' leg ulcers. The Club intends to achieve this goal:

- ▶▶ By monitoring the success of each member by following a structured exercise plan such as printed exercise and record sheets updated at each Leg Club session
- ▶▶ By encouraging group members to compete with each other
- ▶▶ By helping the members to understand the benefits of healthy eating and exercise on an ongoing basis
- ▶▶ Encouraging the group to support each other with issues such as losing weight, giving up smoking and cutting down on alcohol consumption. **WUK**