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Pressure Ulcers with Exposed Cartilage Are Stage IV Pressure Ulcers

Pressure ulcers are staged based upon the visible or palpable tissue in the ulcer bed. The current definition of a stage IV pressure ulcer is:

Full thickness tissue loss with exposed bone, tendon or muscle. Slough or eschar may be present on some parts of the wound bed. Often including undermining and tunneling.

They are further described as:

The depth of a stage IV pressure ulcer varies by anatomical location. The bridge of the nose, ear, occiput and malleolus do not have (adipose) subcutaneous tissue and these ulcers are typically shallow. Stage IV ulcers can extend into muscle and/or supporting structures (e.g., fascia, tendon or joint capsule) making osteomyelitis likely to occur. Exposed bone/tendon is visible or directly palpable.

Although the presence of visible or palpable cartilage at the base of a pressure ulcer was not included in the stage IV terminology; it is the opinion of the NPUAP that cartilage serves the same anatomical function as bone. Therefore, pressure ulcers that have exposed cartilage should be classified as a Stage IV.

The National Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel developed the current staging system in 2007 and continues to monitor it for needed revisions. NPUAP is an interprofessional group of experts in pressure ulcers. The NPUAP serves as the authoritative voice for improved patient/resident outcomes in pressure ulcer prevention and treatment through public policy, education and research. Contact NPUAP at www.npuap.org.

This position statement is intended for wide public distribution. Please share with your contacts who may benefit from this information.

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