



O&P Risk Advisor

RISK MANAGEMENT NEWSLETTER FOR THE ORTHOTICS & PROSTHETICS BUSINESS OWNER

Meeting the challenge of skin problems in amputees

Skin problems can keep amputees from wearing their prosthesis, leading to inactivity and frustration. It's vital that orthotic and prosthetic clinicians not only take steps to prevent skin problems but also to recognize them early. Early treatment will help minimize the negative effects of skin conditions such as dermatitis or breakdown.

The best approach is for clinicians and patients to form a prevention partnership.

Prevention partnership: Clinicians

For clinicians, prevention starts with a proper fit of the prosthesis. Choose a prosthesis suitable to the patient's activity level and be sure it's not too tight or too loose. The snug fit that's required for optimal prosthesis functioning also creates a negative effect by trapping perspiration, which can lead to skin breakdown.

In addition, friction can occur from rubbing between the socket and the skin. A stump sock will help reduce friction; a sheath or liner may be used under the sock. Be sure the sock isn't too thick or too thin. It's usually best for patients to wear shoes that were worn before the amputation to promote good body alignment.

Assess the skin at each visit for signs and symptoms of skin problems, including redness, rash, tenderness, and breakdown. Consider comorbid conditions, particularly diabetes or peripheral vascular disease, that might put patients at risk for skin breakdown. Keep in mind that skin redness or breakdown may be the first clue that the fit needs adjusted.

Stop skin problems before they happen

To help your patients ensure a proper fit and prevent skin problems:

- Carefully fit the prosthetic and check the fit with each visit.
- Develop a specific stump and socket hygiene program for each patient.
- Instruct patients to check the skin carefully and report any problems; check it yourself at each visit.
- Tell patients to check with you before using any creams or lotions on the stump.
- Encourage patients to keep their weight stable, eat a healthy diet, and drink plenty of water.

Prevention partnership: Patients

The patient's contribution to the partnership includes hygiene, observation, and self care.

Poor hygiene can lead to skin breakdown or infection, so teach patients how to care for the stump. Tell patients to wash the stump daily with an unscented, antibacterial soap and warm water. The prosthetic socket should also be washed. Patients should wash stump socks and liners immediately, before the perspiration dries, and allow the materials to dry completely before wearing them.

Tell patients to inspect the stump skin every day for redness—the first sign of skin breakdown—as well as blisters, ulcers, or skin irritation. Patients should call their providers if they detect a problem.

In addition, encourage patients to comply with their treatment for other medical conditions, such as diet and medication for diabetes. They should also maintain a stable body weight—to ensure continued fit of the prosthesis—and a healthy diet.

When the skin is already injured

A special challenge in preventing skin breakdown is the patient whose already has a skin problem, such as an amputation related to a burn injury.

Burned skin may take a significant amount of time to heal before a prosthetic can be fitted. Patients may have a limited range of motion and itching from wound healings. It's vital to take time to assess the patient to determine the appropriate time for fitting. Vigilant monitoring the skin condition is a key patient education instruction.

Other skin conditions such as blisters should be treated before the prosthesis is fitted.

Write it up

Document your prevention strategies, including patient education, in the medical record. Give patients written instructions and keep a copy in the record. Also record each skin assessment and the actions you took if you observed a problem.

By being vigilant, you can help patients avoid skin problems and to receive prompt treatment should they occur.

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The opportunities and pitfalls of social media

Social media connect us in new ways, and O&P businesses are getting into the act. Make sure you're aware of not only the benefits, but also some of the potential pitfalls.

Harnessing the potential

Social media can be a tremendous resource of industry information. Organizations like the American Orthotics & Prosthetics Association have established an online presence to improve the speed and quality of educational material and product content. With social media, O&P practitioners can keep up with the latest news and research, connect with potential customers, enhance communication with other providers, and discuss issues related to the O&P industry, such as best practices, safety, and patient education. When using social media in healthcare, however, the need to protect patient privacy is paramount.

Proceed with caution

Patient confidentiality should remain foremost in your mind as you choose how and what to post through social media. Use the same level of caution and common sense that you apply to traditional communication tools regarding privacy, professionalism, and patient rights:

- Never share your work experiences on any social media
- Never reveal information that can identify your patients
- Never give medical advice on social media
- Never share experiences on challenging patients or interesting medical problems
- Never post patient information on your personal page
- Adhere to the legal and regulatory requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

Setting policy

Create a social media policy and educate your employees. An initial step you can take is to evaluate existing acceptable use, privacy and confidential information policies, and their applicability to social networking. Make sure your social media guidelines and policies are clear, and spell out consequences for violations. Provide examples of acceptable social media postings and conduct staff training on the policies and procedures for your practice. Document the training session content and attendance.

By remembering to protect patient privacy and establish a social media policy, you can access a wealth of information and connect with colleagues online while avoiding liability issues and keeping yourself—and your patients—safe.

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