



Essex electrician who became homeless after insect bite caused huge leg ulcer warns people who are worried to seek urgent medical help

- 'Get Loud For Legs And Feet' – national Legs Matter Week October 12-16
- Hackney's Accelerate wound care centre urges people to check their legs and feet
- Life-changing leg and foot problems affect estimated 1 million people
- Chipping Ongar man backs campaign to stop preventable disability

An electrician, who found himself unable to work and living in his car after a mosquito bite resulted in a large leg ulcer, is urging people to get the right medical help early if they are worried about their legs and feet.

Shaun Bunting, who now lives in supported accommodation in the High Street, Chipping Ongar, became homeless after being bitten while working abroad in Namibia.

The 53 year-old said: "I'd had a leg ulcer before so I knew what one looked like and could see that that's what my bite had turned into. I always carried compression stockings with me because of the previous leg ulcer and I put them on, but it just kept growing until it had spread right across the back of my leg. I knew I had to get back to the UK straight away."

When Shaun returned to Loughton, Essex, in June 2019, he immediately referred himself to Accelerate, a leading specialist wound care centre in Mare Street, Hackney, renowned for its pioneering approaches and high healing rates.

He was diagnosed with a hard-to-treat skin condition that causes painful leg ulcers called pyoderma gangrenosum. By this stage, he was on several types of medication, including morphine and steroids, he couldn't walk without a stick and could no longer work.

He said: "I'm self-employed and if I can't work, I can't afford to pay rent or bills. I'd gone from having a regular income to having to get by on less than £400 a month on Universal Credit. I ended up living on people's sofas and eventually had to live in my car. I was in so much pain that I could barely sleep. I can understand how people are pushed to the verge of suicide by these things."

At the height of lockdown, he was admitted to The Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel for three weeks and after finding out he was homeless, the nurses put him in touch with a housing association. Within three days they'd found him temporary accommodation to move into.

He said: "I'm very grateful for the care and support I have had to help me get well and to get a roof back over my head. It sounds unbelievable to say it was caused by an insect bite on my leg. People

just aren't aware of the risks or that younger people can get ulcers on their legs and feet too. I just so happened to get a mosquito bite that turned really nasty because I didn't get the right treatment early on."

Accelerate CEO Alison Hopkins is part of the Legs Matter Campaign, which is working to improve care for serious lower leg conditions including leg or foot ulcers, swollen legs and cellulitis. She hopes that increased awareness will result in more people demanding that the right care is provided the first time and help to prevent patient suffering.

She said: "Lower limb conditions are a silent and growing epidemic, but with the right care, much of the suffering and life-changing leg and foot problems could be avoided. As part of Legs Matter Week this year we are urging people to seek help quickly if they are worried and to go back to their health care provider if their leg or foot isn't healing, to help avoid a permanent disability."

The UK has a growing number of people experiencing serious lower limb problems - often linked to obesity and costing the NHS up to £5.3 billion annually.ⁱ

As well as leading to extensive suffering, these problems are also leaving many people with amputated legs, feet and toes, secondary health issues and deteriorating health.

From October 12-16, Legs Matter Week hopes to encourage more people to check their legs and feet using a simple three-point checklist <https://legsmatter.org/three-point-leg-check/> and to seek the right help if they are worried. Organisers have created the 'Legs Matter Lounge' with helpful videos, resources and free virtual events including meditation and live Q&A sessions with experts, sign up here: <https://legsmatter.org/legs-matter-week/lounge>.

Since lockdown, important, new self-care Coronavirus resources for patients, families and health care professionals have also been added to the Legs Matter website www.legsmatter.org to meet the growing demand for information.

Shaun said: "There needs to be more awareness about leg and foot care problems so that people can spot and treat them earlier and stop them becoming serious. I've now got problems with my lower back because of walking with a stick and I've put on weight because of the steroids. I can't walk more than 200 metres without having to rest - it just spirals out of control."

An All-Party Parliamentary Report published in February 2019 has called for action in tackling differences in lower limb amputation rates. It said: "The fact that every hour in England someone over 50 has a minor foot amputation and every two hours someone loses their whole leg is unacceptable."ⁱⁱ

And an NHS England study published in 2017 estimates that having effective care early, reduces leg ulcer healing times from around two years to just a few months and is 10 times cheaper. But many patients suffer unnecessarily for several years due to a lack of knowledge and not accessing the right care.ⁱⁱⁱ

Supported by NHS England, the Legs Matter Campaign was formed by a group of the UK's leading lower limb clinicians, who, together with patient partners, are campaigning to make serious leg and foot problems a thing of the past.

Operating under the governance of the charity, The Tissue Viability Society, Legs Matter is also made up of representatives from The British Lymphology Society, Accelerate, The College of Podiatry, The Society of Vascular Nurses, The Lindsay Leg Club Foundation, Foot in Diabetes UK and The Leg Ulcer Forum. It wants to ensure that anyone with a lower leg or foot problem understands their condition and gets the urgent care and support that they need.

For more information go to www.legsmatter.org or watch our film <https://legsmatter.org/legsmatter-week/watch-our-film/>

Note to Editors:

- Read Legs Matter member expert opinions in our **Making legs matter in a global pandemic**: what we know and what needs to happen now. Health experts share their opinion on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown on the nation's leg and foot health. <https://legsmatter.org/making-legs-matter-in-a-global-pandemic/>
- Every hour in the UK someone over 50 has part of their foot amputated.^{iv}
- Amputation rates are 70% higher in the Black as compared to the White populations of England.^v
- There is a North/South divide with major amputation rates 30% higher in Northern England compared with the South.^{vi}
- More than 420,000 people in the UK live with lymphoedema (failure of the lymphatic system) – making it as common as Alzheimer's disease.^{vii}

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References:

ⁱ Guest JF, Ayoub N, McIlwraith T, et al. Health economic burden that wounds impose on the National Health Service in the UK. BMJ Open 2015 <https://legsmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/e009283.full.pdf>

ⁱⁱ APPG on Vascular And Venous Disease: Saving Limbs, Saving Lives: 2019 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5981cfcfe4fcb50783c82c8b/t/5c5ac501ec212df19f93a228/1549452562850/A%2BCall%2Bto%2BAction%2Bto%2BReduce%2BInequalities%2Bin%2BLower%2BLimb%2BAmputation%2BRates%2Bw....pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ NHS England RightCare Scenario: 2017 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/rightcare/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/2017/01/nhs-rightcare-bettys-story-narrative-full.pdf>

^{iv} APPG on Vascular And Venous Disease: Saving Limbs, Saving Lives: 2019 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5981cfcfe4fcb50783c82c8b/t/5c5ac501ec212df19f93a228/1549452562850/A%2BCall%2Bto%2BAction%2Bto%2BReduce%2BInequalities%2Bin%2BLower%2BLimb%2BAmputation%2BRates%2Bw....pdf>

^v As above

^{vi} As above

