Pressure equalisation as a principle for designing support surfaces to prevent deep tissue pressure ulcers

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Abstract

When immobile or neuropathic patients are supported by beds or chairs, their soft tissues undergo deformations that can cause pressure ulcers. Current support surfaces that redistribute under-body pressures at vulnerable body sites have not succeeded in reducing pressure ulcer prevalence. Here we show that adding a supporting lateral pressure can counter-act the deformations induced by under-body pressure, and that this 'pressure equalisation' approach is a more effective way to reduce ulcer-inducing deformations than current approaches based on redistributing under-body pressure.

A finite element model of the seated pelvis predicts that applying a lateral pressure to the soft tissue reduces peak Von Mises stress in the deep tissue by a factor of 2.4 relative to a standard cushion — a greater effect than that achieved by using a more conformable cushion. The ratio of peak lateral pressure to peak under-body pressure was shown to regulate deep tissue stress better than under-body pressure alone. By optimising the magnitude and position of lateral pressure, tissue deformations can be reduced to that induced when suspended in a fluid.

Our results explain the lack of efficacy in current support surfaces, and suggest a new approach to designing and evaluating support surfaces: ensuring sufficient lateral pressure is applied to counter-act under-body pressure.

Keywords

Deep Tissue Injury; Support Surfaces; Tissue Viability; Seating Biomechanics; Pressure ulcer; Patient Care; Soft tissue mechanics

1 Introduction

Supporting the body weight of critically ill, immobilised or paraplegic people without causing soft-tissue injury is not an easy task. The loading induced while lying or sitting for prolonged periods can cause damage to skin, adipose tissue and muscle; this damage is known as a pressure ulcer. Pressure ulcers are estimated to affect one in five hospitalised patients in Europe [36], and cost health services billions of pounds each year [2]. A severe form of pressure ulcer develops in subdermal tissue close to bony prominences such as the ischial tuberosity and sacrum of the pelvis [28, 10], and is known as a deep tissue injury. One measure to prevent pressure ulcers is to design better support surfaces, and this has been a major area of research for the past forty years[1]. While support surfaces have become increasingly high-tech, they have yet to outperform high-specification foam mattresses, and their adoption in clinics has not led to a significant reduction in pressure ulcer prevalence [22]. While this lack of progress may indicate that we have reached the limit of support surface design, in this paper, we argue that current designs have been based upon a suboptimal design principle — that of under-body pressure re-distribution.

The assumption that high surface pressure leads to pressure ulcers, and therefore should be reduced, seems obvious. However, experimental, computational and clinical evidence suggests that high surface pressures do not necessarily cause pressure ulcers. Peak surface pressures (as measured by pressure mapping sensor arrays) cannot identify at-risk patients [32, 12]. High-tech mattresses that reduce peak surface pressures have increasingly been adopted in clinical settings yet their impact on pressure ulcer prevalence has been disappointing [22] . Furthermore, soft tissue *can* tolerate extremely high surface pressures under certain circumstances. The soft tissues of a deep-sea diver, for example, are exposed to 100 kPa of surface pressure for every 10 m descended, yet pressure-related injuries to soft tissues are not a common issue

[1] Patents relating to active pressure ulcer relieving mattresses go back to at least the 1970's (US3678520A, for example), and indeed an 'invalid bed' was patented in 1864 (US43900A).

in diving [23, 4]. Computational studies have helped to explain these observations, with Oomens et al. [27] demonstrating that peak surface pressure has very little impact on internal deformations near bony prominences — regions where deep tissue injuries are likely to occur [3, 27]. If the principle of pressure re-distribution is to be improved upon, we must re-evaluate the link between surface pressure and deep tissue deformation, while linking this to the complex aetiology of pressure ulcers.

Deep tissue pressure ulcers develop as a result of several overlapping processes: ischaemia [17], ischaemia-reperfusion injury [29] lymphatic network obstruction [18, 31] and direct cell deformation [11]. Each of these processes is triggered by excessive deformation (exacerbated by shear stresses, microclimate, and other risk factors) within soft tissue, and so in some regards, a pressure ulcer should be more aptly named a 'deformation ulcer'. Redistributing surface pressure (as current devices aim to do) does not necessarily reduce deformations (and hence pressure ulcers) because soft tissue has very different tolerances to the two components of stress (figure 1): deviatoric stress (which tends to change the shape of an object) and dilatational stress (which tends to change the volume of an object, but not its shape) [14, 7]. Human soft tissues are almost incompressible [15], and so can tolerate high dilatational stress with minimal deformation. In contrast, soft tissues deform readily with deviatoric stress, therefore it is this stress that must be minimised to prevent ulceration. While submersed, a diver experiences nearly uniform pressures on all surfaces; this tends to induce dilatational stress [7]. On the other hand, interaction with very localised surface pressure – such as when sitting on a chair or lying on a mattress – induces large deviatoric stress (and therefore deformations) as the soft tissue bulges and is displaced laterally away from the load (figure 1). One way to prevent excessive deformations may be to restrain the soft tissue from deforming by applying a supporting lateral pressure. In this paper, we test the plausibility of this principle using a computational model of the weight-bearing pelvis in a seated individual. We hypothesise that applying pressure laterally to the soft

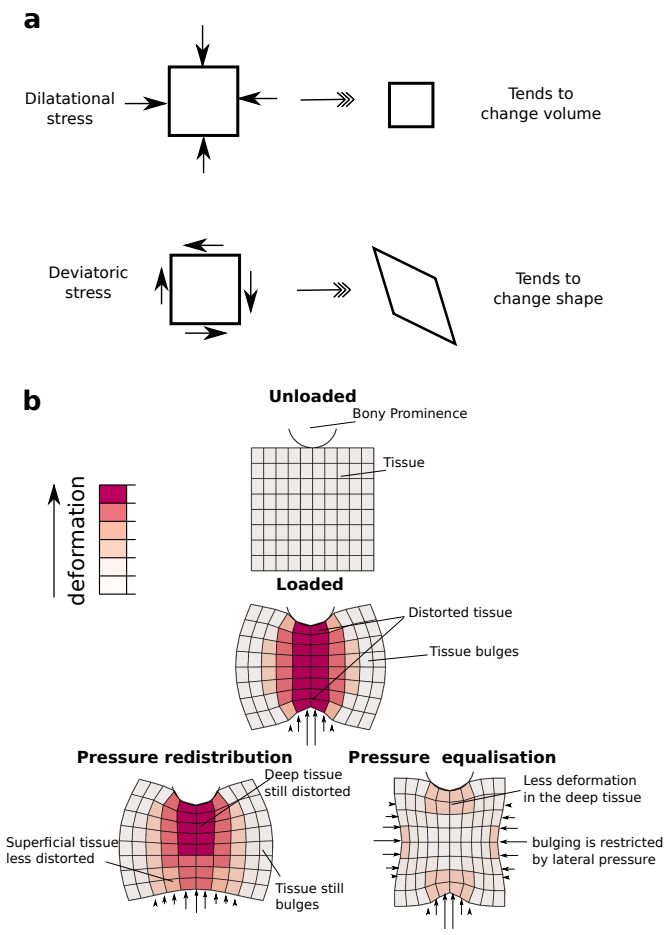

Figure 1: Deformations beneath a bony prominence. The stress in soft tissue has two components, dilatational and deviatoric (a). Soft tissue is much more resistant to dilatational stress than deviatoric stress. Under a bony prominence, the soft tissue is distorted due to the concentrated pressures at the bone and the support (b). Redistributing the surface pressure has some effect on the outer (superficial) region, but not on the deep tissue. We hypothesise that by applying pressure laterally (termed pressure equalisation), bulging is reduced, and the tissue can bear the load in a more dilatational mode.

tissue of the pelvis will reduce the deformation at the ischial tuberosity to a greater extent than the commonly applied method of redistributing under-body pressure (figure 1b).

2 Methods

First, we adapted a previously-developed finite element model of seated buttocks [27] to test the hypothesis that applying lateral pressure will reduce tissue deformations (section 2.1). The seated position was chosen because the ischial tuberosity is a common site for deep tissue injury [36]. Next, we used the model to compare the effect on deep tissue mechanics of applying lateral pressure to that of changing the stiffness of a standard cushion (section 2.2). Finally, we sought to formalise the relationship between surface pressure and internal deformations into a design principle — equalising under-body pressure with lateral pressure. To do this, we described the interaction of soft tissue and a support surface as a surface pressure boundary condition, which could be manipulated and studied independently of particular cushion design (section 2.3). All finite element input files and analysis protocols are supplied as supplementary data.

2.1 Model of the seated pelvis with lateral pressure application

2.1.1 Geometry and material models

An axisymmetric geometry was used to model the soft tissue surrounding a single ischial tuberosity in a seated individual. The geometry was similar to that used by Oomens et al. [27], but included more of the pelvis soft tissue to allow lateral pressure to be applied (figure 2). The soft tissue was partitioned into fat, muscle and skin to produce similar patterns as found from MRI imaging (figure 2). Each region was assigned an Ogden hyperelastic material model, and parameters were chosen to be consistent with the model described in Oomens et al. [27] (table 1). A flat, 76 mm-thick, two-layered seat cushion was modelled

Material	μ (MPa)	a (-)
Skin	0.04	30
Fat	0.025	10
Muscle	0.045	5
Stiff cushion	0.08	10
Medium cushion	0.005	10
Soft cushion top	0.0035	7
Soft cushion bottom	0.005	10

Table 1: Parameters for the Ogden material model for each of the materials modelled. Ogden strain energy density function: $U = \frac{2\mu}{a^2}(\lambda_1^a + \lambda_2^a + \lambda_3^a - 3)$, where $\lambda_{1,2,3}$ are the principal stretches [35].

with hyperelastic material properties representing a soft cushion (table 1). An air-filled chamber (the pressure-equalisation device) was introduced to apply a lateral pressure to the soft tissues (figure 2). This was shaped to conform to the seated pelvis, and was modelled using membrane elements that can resist tensile, but not bending, loads. The chamber wall material was modelled as sufficiently stiff (E = 10 MPa) so as not to allow appreciable changes in length.

2.1.2 Boundary Conditions

The amount of load supported by the pelvis was estimated at 400N — representing approximately 50% of the body weight of an 80 kg adult [27] — with each tuberosity bearing 200N. Symmetry boundary conditions were prescribed to all nodes lying along the z-axis (figure 2). The cushion base was constrained in all directions. Two nodes of the pressure equalisation device were constrained in all directions, and a uniform pressure was applied to the inner surface of the chamber to a maximum of 80 kPa. Frictionless contact was assumed between the support surfaces and the skin. Normal contact behaviour was enforced using the penalty method with finite-sliding [35].

2.1.3 Solution approach and output

A mesh sensitivity analysis was performed leading to a final mesh of 13056 linear quadrilateral elements representing the soft tissues (figure 2 c). All models were

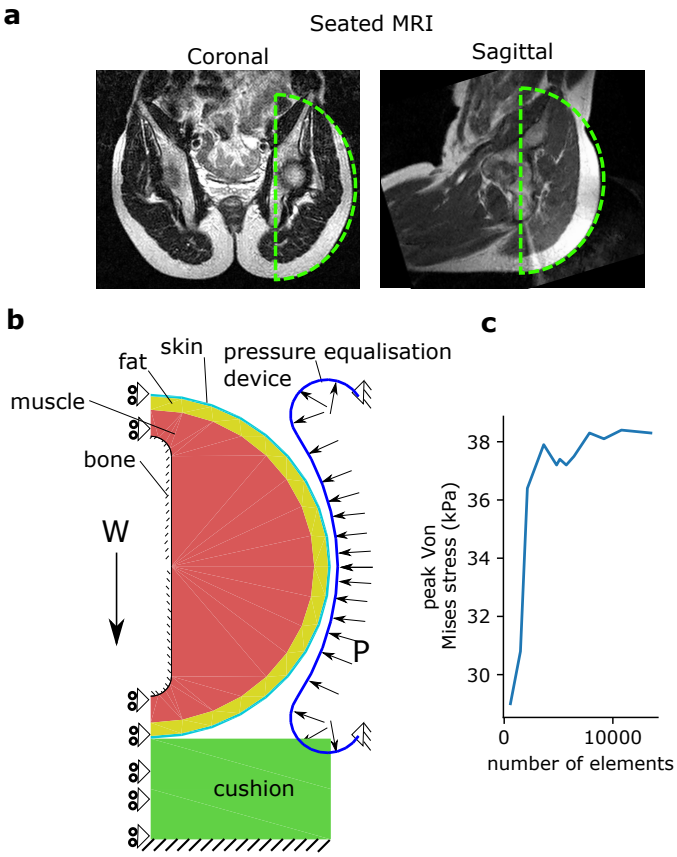

Figure 2: A model of the soft tissue surrounding the ischial tuberosity. The region modelled is shown superimposed on saggital and coronal MR images of a seated male (a). The model incorporates a rigid bony prominence, muscle, fat and skin layers interacting with a cushion and a pressure equalisation device (b). Axisymmetry was assumed, which allowed a force-controlled simulation of weight-bearing (W is the load borne by the ischial tuberosity). The pressure equalisation device was modelled as an air-filled chamber with a controllable internal pressure, P. A mesh sensitivity study showed less than 1% change in peak Von Mises stress with increasing density (c)

solved as quasi-static, non-linear analyses using the ABAQUS finite element software v2016. To analyse and compare models, the Von Mises stresses and shear strains[2] in the soft tissue regions were calculated. These were chosen to represent the level of deviatoric stress and strain, respectively.

Before summarising the stress and strain data, we adjusted to account for the varying volume of elements throughout the model. The data was re-sampled, with the probability of each point being chosen being the volume associated with that point (IVOL output from ABAQUS). Weighting the results like this ensures that analyses are independent of mesh density, which varies throughout the model.

Peak stress was defined as the 95th percentile of the stress data to avoid extreme outliers that may be sensitive to boundary conditions. Effects sizes (in the mean and peak values) between models were estimated by calculating bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals using the dabest python package (`https://pypi.org/project/dabest/`). We also analysed deep tissue stress along a path through the soft tissue directly beneath the ischial tuberosity, and along the surface of the ischial tuberosity.

2.2 Comparing lateral pressure application to changing cushion stiffness

Cushion stiffness is a design variable commonly used to create a more conformable cushion, and this was used as an intervention to compare to adding lateral pressure. The model described above was adapted to model load-bearing on three different cushion designs – a stiff, medium, and soft variety. The stiff and medium cushions were homogeneous, 38 mm thick cushions, while the most compliant (softest) was produced by defining a 76 mm thick two-layer cushion as in the previous section. The bottom layer of this cushion had the medium-stiffness cushion properties, and a softer material was assigned to the 38 mm

[2] Von Mises stress is a scalar representing the deviatoric part of the stress tensor $q = \sqrt{\frac{3}{2}S_{ij}S_{ij}}$, $S_{ij} = \sigma_{ij} + p\delta_{ij}$, $p = -\frac{1}{3}\sigma_{ii}$. Shear strain was calculated as $\epsilon_1 - \epsilon_3$, where ϵ_1, ϵ_3 are the maximum and minimum principal strains.

top layer (table 1). These cushions were based on those analysed by Oomens et al. [27], which were in turn calibrated to model materials commonly used in wheelchair cushions.

For each of the three cushion simulations, load-bearing to 200N was established as in section 2.1. Pressure in the pressure equalisation device was then increased incrementally to a maximum of 80 kPa. The stresses and strains induced when lateral pressure is applied were computed.

2.3 Determining the relationship between surface pressure and deep tissue mechanics

We studied how the shape and magnitude of the surface pressure distribution affected internal tissue stress to understand how these stresses can be minimised. The specific cushions and lateral support used in the previous sections were removed and replaced with a surface pressure boundary condition. For our axisymmetric model, pressure is a function of the angle from vertical, $P(\theta)$. The surface pressure was constrained to ensure that the model was in static equilibrium: the sum of the vertical forces due to surface pressure is equal to body weight, ($\oint P(\theta)\cos\theta dS = W$), and the sum of the horizontal forces is zero ($\oint P(\theta)\sin\theta dS = 0$).

The surface pressure on the buttocks when seated on a flat cushion follows a characteristic distribution [30] — there is a pressure peak beneath each ischial tuberosity which gradually reduces to zero towards the periphery of the contact area (supplementary figure 1). This contact pressure was modelled as a Gaussian distribution (see supplementary data). The spread of the pressure peak (α) was varied between 0.2 and 0.35, which represent cushions with stiffness values beyond the range of those tested in section 2.2. We then modelled an externally-applied lateral pressure by defining a second Gaussian term. This was controlled by its spread (β), its magnitude (P_L), and its location (θ_0). β and θ_0 were fixed (0.4 and $\pi/4$ respectively) and P_L/P_V (the ratio of lateral pressure relative to under-body pressure) was varied from 0% to 75%. This led to 16 parameter

Pressure re-distribution (α)	Lateral Pressure (P_L/P_V)
0.2	0
0.25	0
0.3	0
0.35	0
0.2	0.25
0.25	0.25
0.3	0.25
0.35	0.25
0.2	0.50
0.25	0.50
0.3	0.50
0.35	0.50
0.2	0.75
0.25	0.75
0.3	0.75
0.35	0.75

Table 2: Parameters governing the spread of the under-body pressure (α) and the magnitude of lateral pressure. Lateral pressure was defined relative to the peak under-body pressure (P_L/P_V).

combinations, described in table 2. Each pressure field was then applied as a boundary condition to the soft-tissue finite element model, and peak stresses and strains were calculated.

2.3.1 Optimising the surface pressure distribution

We considered the pressure distribution of a body suspended in a fluid as an ideal support scenario [7], as it results in minimal deviatoric stress relative to dilatational stress (see supplementary data). We then optimised the location (θ_0) and relative magnitude of the lateral pressure (P_L/P_V) to minimise the difference between $P(\theta)$ and the distribution when suspended in a fluid, while ensuring that the full body weight (200N) was supported (see supplementary data).

3 Results

3.1 Applying lateral pressure reduces soft tissue deformations

We first set out to determine the effect of adding lateral pressure to a person seated on a standard support surface. We used a finite element model of the pelvis to simulate weight bearing while sitting on a soft cushion. Firstly, we simulated weight bearing without lateral support. Similar to other studies [27, 8, 7], the model predicts significant stress concentrations under the ischial tuberosity (figure 3a), with peak Von Mises stresses of 58 kPa produced in the muscle. Then, when lateral pressure is applied, the peak Von Mises stress beneath the bony prominence drops to 18 kPa, in support of our hypothesis. Contour plots show the stress is more evenly distributed in the soft tissues (figure 3a), suggesting that more of the soft tissue is being recruited in transferring the load.

The volume of muscle tissue around the ischial tuberosity exposed to high Von Mises stress (> 20 kPa) is reduced from 58% to 4% with lateral pressure application (figure 3b). The volume of muscle tissue exposed to high shear strains (> 0.2) fell from 20% to 0%. Adding lateral pressure reduces the mean Von Mises stress by 64% (95% CI 61% to 68%), while mean shear strains are reduced by 42% (95% CI 41% to 43%) when lateral pressure is applied (figure 3b).

Plots of stress along a path through the soft tissue show that Von Mises stress is reduced in all tissues under the ischial tuberosity when lateral pressure is applied (figure 3c), with stress reduction being most pronounced in the muscle (66% in muscle, 43% in fat and 49% in skin). These results show that adding lateral pressure can reduce deep tissue deviatoric stress and deformation.

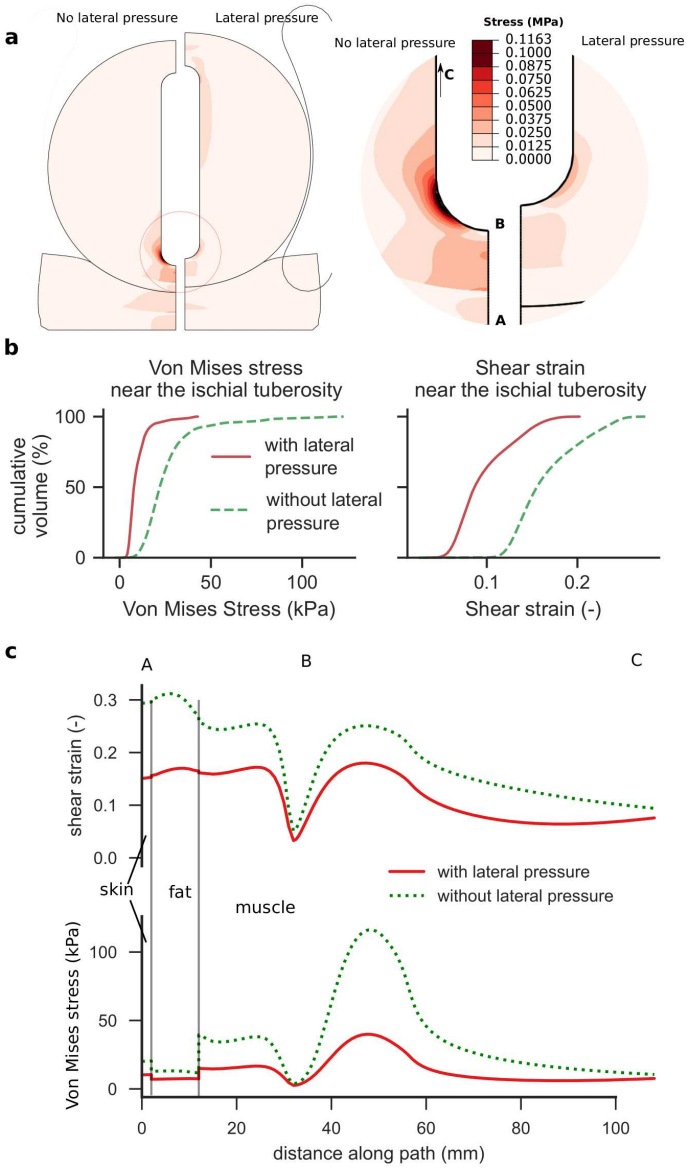

Figure 3: Analysis of load-bearing when seated on a soft cushion. In the absence of lateral pressure, the model predicts high von Mises stresses under the ischial tuberosity (a). With the introduction of lateral pressure (44 kPa chamber pressure), the region of high stress shrinks dramatically. Histograms of stresses and strains in the muscle tissue within a radius of 30 mm from the ischial tuberosity (b) indicate that Von Mises stresses and shear strains are reduced. Analysis of the stress along path ABC (c) show a drop in Von Mises stress and shear strain at the bony prominence, and throughout the muscle tissue. Shear strain and Von Mises stress are also reduced in the skin and fat layers.

3.2 Applying lateral pressure reduces deformations to a greater extent than changing cushion stiffness

Having established that applying lateral pressure reduces deep tissue stress and deformation, we next assessed the effect of this intervention compared to a common device design consideration — changing cushion stiffness (figure 4). Cushion stiffness is usually manipulated as a way to reduce peak pressures by maximising the contact area with the soft tissue. Indeed, the soft cushion provides approximately 3.5 times more contact area than the stiff cushion (72 cm^2 in the stiff cushion, 177 cm^2 in the medium cushion and 255 cm^2 in the soft cushion), indicating that we are capturing a broad range of support surface stiffnesses. This area increase could be expected to achieve a similar reduction in deep tissue deformation. However, Von Mises stresses (figure 4 a) and shear strains (figure 4 b) in the deep tissue are relatively less affected — with the change from a stiff to a soft cushion we see a reduction by a factor of 1.4 in peak Von Mises stress (figure 4 c). Without lateral pressure, all cushions induce a peak Von Mises stress > 50 kPa. We find that introducing lateral pressure reduces the peak Von Mises stresses observed with each cushion by a factor of 2.4 on average (1.9 for the stiff cushion, 2.1 for the medium cushion and 3.2 for the soft cushion; figure 4 c). The lowest peak deep tissue stresses are observed when the soft cushion is combined with lateral pressure, which reduces the peak Von Mises stress to 18 kPa, suggesting a synergistic effect of combining lateral pressure with a soft cushion (figure 4 c).

We noticed that there is an optimum magnitude of lateral pressure which is different for each cushion (38.5 kPa, 37.9 kPa and 12.2 kPa for stiff, medium and soft cushions, respectively); however, the ratio of lateral to under-body pressure is consistently between 0.6 and 0.8 (figure 4 d). This suggests that balancing under-body and lateral pressures is more important for the reduction of deep tissue deviatoric stress than reducing peak under-body pressures.

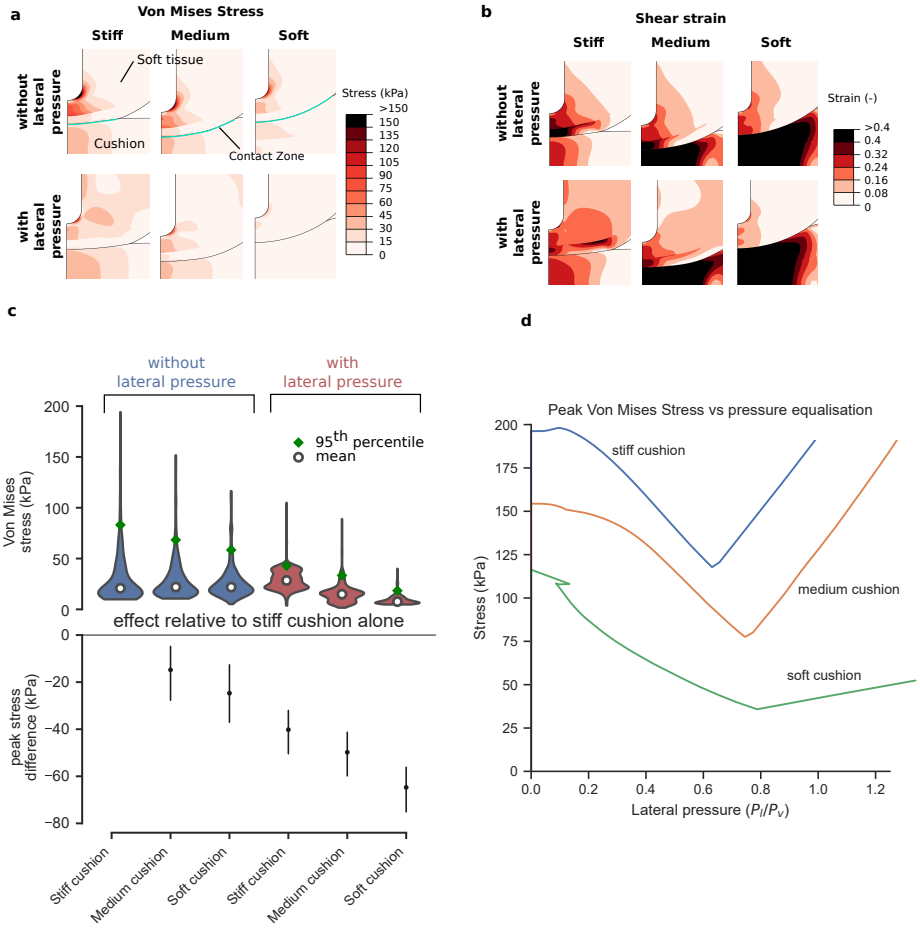

Figure 4: Applying lateral pressure is more effective than changing cushion stiffness. While the contact area varies substantially with cushion stiffness, the pattern of internal stress remains similar (a) — stress is concentrated at the bony prominence. Shear strains in the fat and skin are lower when a softer cushion is used (b), but strains within the muscle remain high for all cushions. These strains are reduced when lateral pressure is introduced. All three cushions benefit from the introduction of lateral pressure, with a soft cushion and lateral pressure providing the lowest Von Mises stresses (c) [Violin plots show mean and 95th percentile values, stress difference plot shows the peak difference relative to a stiff cushion only with 95% confidence intervals]. As lateral pressure is gradually increased, the Von Mises stress decreases until an optimum pressure is reached (d); beyond this pressure, Von Mises stresses begin to increase again. While the magnitude of the optimum lateral pressure is different for each cushion, the ratio of lateral to vertical pressure is between 0.63 and 0.79 for all cushions tested.

3.3 Surface pressure equalisation is necessary to protect deep tissue from deformation

Having found that deep tissue deformations were minimised for each cushion when under-body and lateral pressure were in a specific ratio (0.6-0.8), we sought to test whether this ratio could form the basis of a design principle. We removed the cushion from the model and replaced it with a surface pressure boundary condition that could be manipulated independently of cushion design. We varied both the ratio of lateral to under-body pressure[3] (P_L/P_V), and the spread of underbody pressure (α) and measured peak Von Mises stress for all combinations (table 2).

As in the previous section, in the absence of lateral pressure, redistributing under-body pressure (increasing the spread, α, of the pressure peak), reduces peak Von Mises stresses at the ischial tuberosity, but even substantial re-distribution fails to reduce the stress below 100 kPa (112 kPa is observed when $\alpha = 0.35$; figure 5a). In contrast, inducing a lateral to under-body pressure ratio of 0.25 reduces peak Von Mises stress from 180 kPa to 67 kPa. The presence of lateral pressure appears to reduce the effect of redistributing under-body pressure (figure 5 a), suggesting that when lateral pressure is employed, it becomes the most important factor in reducing deformations. These results indicate that controlling the ratio of lateral to under-body pressure (P_L/P_V) is necessary to achieve low deep-tissue stress.

To understand why lateral pressure may be critical, we studied how this ratio affects the shape of the pressure distribution when compared to two extreme scenarios: the pressure distribution while sitting on a stiff cushion (a high-deformation scenario), and that when suspended in a fluid (a low-deformation scenario). The shape of these distributions are markedly different (supplementary figure 1), with a sharp peak of pressure beneath the ischial tuberosity when seated on a cushion, versus a smooth, even pressure distribution when

[3]rather than simply varying the magnitude of lateral pressure applied, we specified the ratio of lateral to under-body pressure, since when lateral pressure is increased, under-body pressure will automatically be reduced to ensure the body is in static equilibrium.

submersed. A parametric study showed that adding lateral pressure best mimicked the pressure profile of suspension in a fluid (supplementary data).

We then optimised the magnitude and angle of the lateral pressure to best mimic suspension in a fluid. Contour plots show that optimising this lateral pressure (to $P_L/P_V = 0.71$ and $\theta_0 = 61.5°$) can mimic the internal stresses experienced while suspended in a fluid (figure 5b). In addition, wtih these parameters, Von Mises stresses at the ischial tuberosity were either equal to or less than those induced when suspended in a fluid (figure 5c).

In summary, not only can applying lateral pressure reduce deep tissue Von Mises stress and deformation, we have found that an optimal magnitude and location of lateral pressure can mimic the environment induced when suspended in a fluid.

4 Discussion

The goal of reducing peak surface pressures at vulnerable body sites has underpinned the design of almost all medical support surfaces to date. Meanwhile, studies have consistently concluded that peak surface pressures do not accurately predict internal tissue mechanics [27, 12], nor are they effective in predicting patients at risk of pressure ulcers [32]. In this study, we have shown that ensuring under-body and lateral pressures are balanced — a principle we call pressure equalisation — is more effective at reducing deep tissue deformations than reducing peak under-body pressure. We postulate that devices designed to maintain a prescribed ratio of lateral pressure to under-body pressure will reduce the risk of pressure ulcer formation in the soft tissue of immobile patients.

The shift in emphasis from pressure re-distribution to pressure equalisation has implications for support surface design (figure 6). The synthesised results of multiple clinical trials [22] suggest that any well-designed mattress is better than a standard hospital bed, but none are particularly successful at reducing pressure ulcer risk. Pressure redistributing devices (either passive or active, figure 6 a and

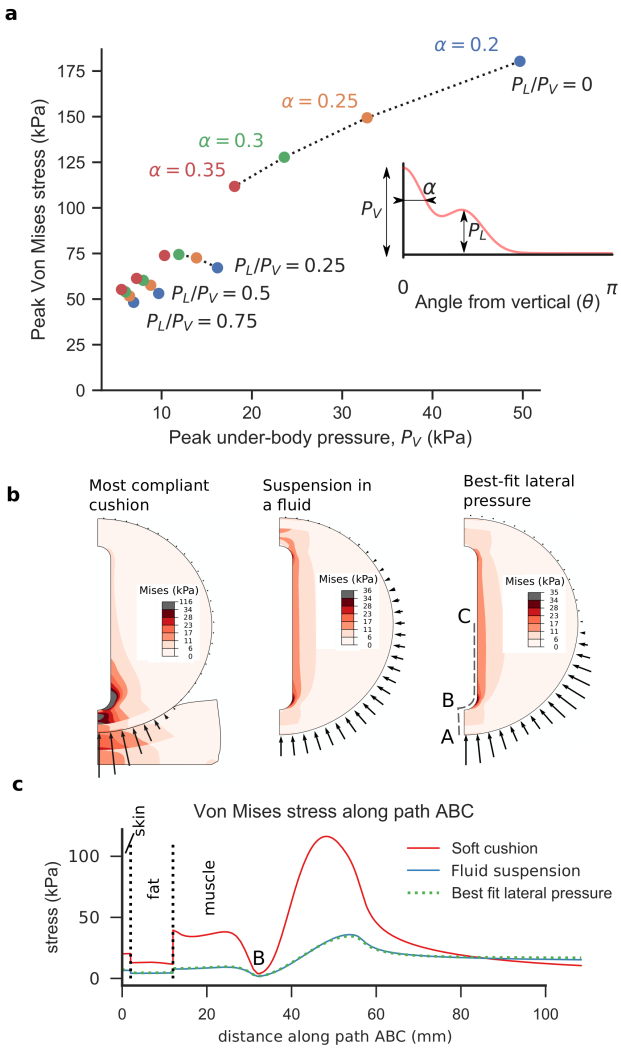

Figure 5: Surface pressure analysis. Redistributing under-body pressure (P_V) reduces peak Von Mises stresses when no lateral pressure is applied (a), but peak stresses remain above 100 kPa. Counter-acting that pressure with a lateral pressure (P_L) reduces peak stresses to a greater extent. When the magnitude and angle of lateral pressure is optimised, the deep tissue Von Mises stresses approach that of suspension in a fluid (b; arrows illustrate pressure intensity). Path plots of Von Mises stress show that lateral pressure can induce a similar stress profile at the bony prominence to that when suspended in a fluid (c).

b respectively) may protect against superficial ulcers, while having little effect on deep tissue injuries [27]. Our results show that devices must be capable of providing sufficient lateral support to counter-act the deformations induced by under-body pressure. Immersion/encapsulation-based devices such as water beds [25] aim to increase the contact area between the soft tissue and the support surface; however, while the contact area may increase, the horizontal pressures at the periphery of the contact area are usually minimal (figure 6c), as pressure is primarily in reaction to gravitational body force. As this force acts in the vertical direction, it would be insufficient to equalise the under-body pressures and prevent bulging. Devices that aim to directly minimise shape change have also been developed [5], but their dependence on vertical translations of pistons means that they are not suited to regulating lateral pressure. We believe the advances in support surface technology may yet reduce pressure ulcer prevalence if they are redirected to achieving pressure equalisation.

The pressure equalisation principle has implications for pressure measurement as a diagnostic tool and as a method of evaluating support surfaces. Surfaces incorporating arrays of pressure sensors have been suggested as early-warning systems for ulceration [1, 38], and are frequently used to evaluate new support surfaces [34, 13, 16]. Using this technology, devices can be readily differentiated based on the peak pressures they produce. However, when these devices are then compared through clinical outcomes, the differences between them vanish [22], and so the current predictive power of pressure measurement is limited. If surface pressure could be measured all around the soft tissues (figure 6d), then the level of pressure equalisation may be a more predictive tool. Then, a measure of the ratio of lateral to under-body pressure (P_L/P_V) could be used to determine ulcer risk, and as a control signal for active devices. The pressure gradient, defined as the spatial change in pressure from the point of peak pressure, has been proposed as an alternative to peak pressure for predicting soft tissue damage [24]. At first glance, pressure equalisation may seem to be equivalent to using pressure gradient as an ulceration indicator. However, the

pressure gradient does not account for the direction of pressure, and so a body could be loaded with a low pressure gradient yet have little or no pressure equalisation, because lateral pressures are not considered. In other words, pressure gradient is a local variable, as is peak pressure, whereas pressure equalisation is a measure of the quality of the body support a whole.

The reductions in deep tissue stress and strain possible through surface pressure equalisation could be sufficient to reduce pressure ulcer risk. The safe magnitude of deformation (and even the most appropriate measure) is not yet fully accounted for [26] and it is likely to be patient, environment, and tissue-specific. In this study, we have used two measures of deep tissue mechanics — Von Mises stress and shear strain. These measures aim to capture the deformations likely to lead to capillary and lymphatic vessel restriction, and cell deformation, which contribute to pressure ulcer onset. Experiments using rat muscle under compression [19] indicated that stresses greater than 32 kPa induced damage, with this threshold dropping to 9 kPa over prolonged loading, while work quantifying deformations in a similar model [6] indicated that damage occurred above a shear strain of 0.3. Our results indicate that redistributing under-body pressure would not protect soft tissue from these levels of deformation, but that applying lateral pressure could.

The 2D finite element model used here simplified the anatomical structure of the pelvis in a similar way to previous studies [27, 7, 8]. These idealisations allowed us to focus on the general case of a bony prominence transferring load through soft tissue to a support surface, and enabled the comparisons and analyses described here. The published models of soft tissue mechanical behaviour are diverse and vary in complexity. This makes conclusions based on absolute values difficult. For this reason, we have focused on the relative effects of interventions on stresses and strains, thus making the conclusions robust against the chosen material models. The inclusion of more anatomical complexity, such as the thighs, femurs, pelvis and upper body will produce a more biofidelic mechanical environment [37, 21, 9] and will be a key step in applying the current results

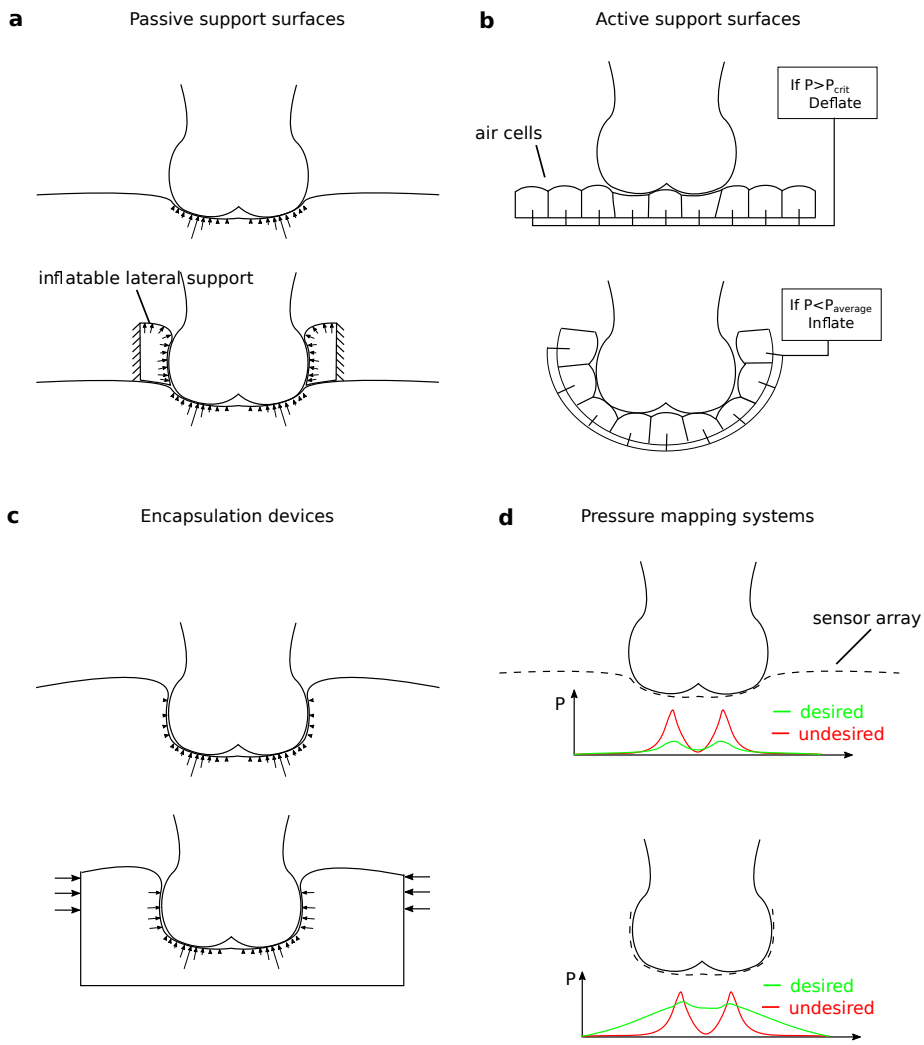

Figure 6: Pressure equalisation and its effects on device design. For surfaces designed to reduce peak pressure passively (a), applying a lateral pressure device helps to avoid lateral bulging. Active devices based on individually controlled air cells (b) could be improved by surrounding the soft tissue, and changing the control software to aim for equalised pressure, rather than reduce peak pressure. Encapsulation devices achieve large contact areas, but the lateral pressures exerted may be limited (c). These could be improved by active compression or smart materials. Pressure mapping systems (d) currently identify pressure peaks as undesirable. If they could measure pressure around the surface, then they could be re-purposed to measure the level of pressure equalisation.

in the clinic. While the principle of pressure equalisation should be just as valid in clinical contexts, the practical application of this principle will be more complex and require significant innovation in device design. For example, it is clear that in applying lateral pressure, care must be taken not to overload the soft tissue covering the femur, as this is also a hotspot for pressure ulcers. The choice of axisymmetry to model the load-bearing pelvis allowed us to define a body weight, while plane-strain based models are typically displacement-controlled, limiting their applicability to modelling load-bearing. Also, axisymmetric models assume strains are equal in all directions, while plane strain models assume that no strain occurs out of the plane. Analysis of deformation in seated patients shows that deformation is in both the coronal and saggital planes [9], suggesting that axisymmetry is more valid. However, axisymmetry leads to the assumption that pressure can be applied all around the pelvis. This model is therefore most representative of the sides and rear of the seated pelvis, not the front, where the legs would impede a device. Physical validation will need to come from measurements of internal tissue deformations, for example through load-bearing MRI [33, 20].

In summary, the results described in this work suggest that the current principles used to design support surfaces are unlikely to result in significant improvements in pressure ulcer prevalence. We propose that a change in focus from redistributing under-body pressure to equalising it with lateral pressure will lead to new innovations and improvements to patient care, resulting in a reduction of pressure ulcer prevalence in immobile patients.

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Data availability

All data required to reproduce the models in the paper are available at figshare. These include:

Abaqus input files for each of the cushion simulations, available at https://figshare.com/s/ddc34f0ae47835ef7a4b

Output data from the simulations, and Jupyter notebooks containing the data analysis used to generate the results and figures available at https://figshare.

com/s/03727cdc9d7d76f9f216 for figures 3 and 4 and https://figshare.com/s/3a252a257dc0d2886b15 for figure 5 and supplementary data.

Competing Interests

CB and SM have filed a patent (application number 1814813.0) for a support surface device based on the principle described in this paper.

Authors' contributions

CB developed the concept, developed and analysed the computational models and wrote the paper. CH, MM and SM helped in the development of the study, advised on methods, analysed the data and commented on the paper at all stages.

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Cushion	$P_V(kPa)$ (kPa)	α (-)
Stiff	60.9	0.170
Medium	47.1	0.184
Soft	25.7	0.272

Table 3: Parameters found through non-linear least square fitting of a gaussian distribution to the surface pressure.

S Supplementary Data

S0.1 Analysis of pressure distributions

The surface pressure induced when seated on a cushion follows a characteristic shape (supplementary figure 1a): there is a narrow peak directly beneath the ischial tuberosity, occupying only a small region of the contact area. Pressure as a function of angle from the z-axis (supplementary figure 1b) is adequately described using a gaussian function:

$$P(\theta) = P_V e^{-\frac{(\theta)^2}{2\alpha^2}},\ \theta < \frac{\pi}{2}$$

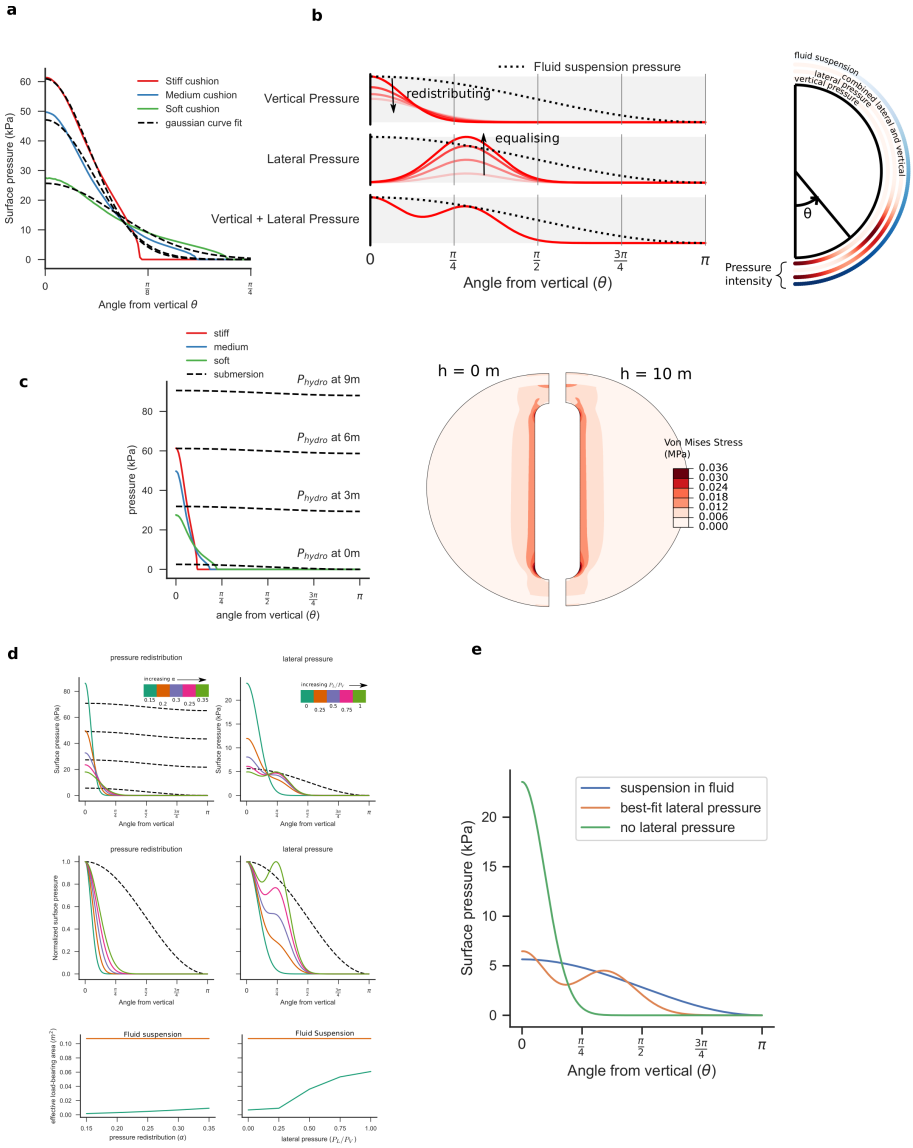
where θ is the swept angle between the vertical and the surface position, α controls the spread of the curve and P_V is the peak pressure magnitude. Non-linear least squares fitting (using the curve_fit function of the scipy module) was used to fit the parameters for each of the three cushion types (table 3).

S0.2 Pressure distribution while suspended in a fluid

Suspension in a fluid can be regarded as a best-case scenario for load-bearing [7]. In this case, the pressure distribution is given as:

$P_{Hydro}(\theta) = \rho g\,(h_0 + r\cos\theta)$

where ρ is density (997 $\mathrm{kg\,m^{-3}}$ for water), g = 9.81 $\mathrm{m\,s^{-2}}$, h_0 is the depth of submersion from the fluid surface to the model centre and r is the outer surface radius (130 mm). The shape of the distribution remains constant as depth is increased, while the magnitudes of the pressures increase (supplemetary figure 1c). The dilatational stress within the soft tissue increases (from 17kPa when



Supplementary Figure 1: **a** Each of the cushions modelled in section 2.2 produces a similar pressure distribution at the skin surface: There is a peak directly beneath the ischial tuberosity ($\theta = 0$), which drops to zero at the periphery of contact. Here, pressure is plotted as a function of the swept angle between the vertical and the position. A gaussian function provides a good fit for this distribution. **b** A schematic showing the lateral and under-body surface pressures. **c** The surface pressure induced when suspended in a fluid (dotted line) is relatively constant from each direction compared to the pressure profile when seated on a cushion (coloured lines). The magnitude of pressure varies substantially with depth, and even at 6 m below the surface, all surfaces are exposed to a pressure greater than that induced by a stiff cushion. When a pressure field representing 10 m submersion is compared to one representing pressure at the surface, the dilatational stress in the tissue increases (from 17kPa at 0m to 243kPa at 10m), but the deviatoric stresses are unchanged. **d** Both pressure re-distribution (increasing α) and applying lateral pressure (increasing P_L/P_V) reduces the peak pressure (top). Applying lateral pressure mimics the hydrostatic loading distribution more effectively than redistributing pressure (middle). The effective load-bearing area (area experiencing more than 50% of the peak pressure value) is increased more with lateral pressure than with re-distribution (bottom). **e** By optimising the magnitude and location of lateral pressure, the pressure profile around the soft tissue can accurately mimic that of suspension in a fluid (hydrostatic pressure).

h0=130mm to 243kPa when h0=10130mm). In contrast, deviatoric stresses (Von Mises) do not change at all as depth is increased.

S0.3 Pressure re-distribution vs pressure equalisation

We modelled the introduction of a lateral pressure equalisation device by applying a new gaussian term, offset from vertical by angle θ_0.

$$P(\theta) = P_V f(\theta) + P_L g(\theta),$$
$$f(\theta) = e^{-\frac{(\theta)^2}{2\alpha^2}},\ \theta < \frac{\pi}{2}$$
$$g(\theta) = e^{-\frac{(\theta-\theta_0)^2}{2\beta^2}}$$

In these equations, P_V and P_L are the vertical and lateral pressure peak magnitudes, α and β control their spread, and θ_0 controls the lateral peak location (supplementary figure 1b). Supplementary figure 1d shows that the ideal pressure profile (that of suspension in a fluid) is best achieved by applying lateral pressure. Taken from a different perspective, an objective of support surface design can be seen as trying to maximise the area of contact between the soft tissue and the cushion. Supplementary figure 1b shows that applying a small amount of lateral pressure increases the effective load bearing area[4] far more than redistributing under-body pressure.

S0.4 Scaling pressure distributions

Once the shape of $P(\theta)$ was described from any of the sections above, it was scaled such that it exerted a net force in the y-direction of 200 N, i.e. to support body force W. The force in the z direction acting on an infinitesimal area dS of a sphere of radius r is $dF_z = P(\theta) \cdot \cos(\theta) dS$,

dS can be parameterised as $dS = r^2 \sin(\theta) d\theta d\phi$, where θ is the polar angle and ϕ the azimuthal angle. The total force in the z direction is then:

$F_z = \int_0^{2\pi} \int_0^{\pi} r^2 P(\theta) \cdot \cos\theta \sin\theta d\theta d\phi = \pi r^2 \int_0^{\pi} P(\theta) \sin(2\theta) d\theta.$

[4]This was defined as the surface area bearing at least half that of the peak pressure.

This was integrated numerically using Python scipy package (code included in figshare data).