

Looking after your skin surgery wound

Te tiaki i tō taotūtanga pokanga kiri

A skin surgery wound is the cut made into your skin by a doctor during an operation or procedure.

There are several things you can do to look after your wound, lower your risk of infection and encourage healing.

- Eat and drink properly. This helps your skin surgery wound heal.
- Follow instructions for bathing and showering. You'll be told when you can have a bath or shower. A shower is better than a bath. You shouldn't put any soap, shower gel, body lotion or talcum powder onto your wound.



Stitches, staples and clips

Wounds are closed with stitches (sometimes called sutures), metal clips, staples or glue. What's used will depend on the type of surgery, the type of wound and the area of your body.

- Dissolvable stitches usually disappear in about one to three weeks. Don't pull the stitches.
- Non-dissolvable stitches are usually removed after three to 14 days. You'll be told when and where they'll be removed. Don't pull the stitches.
- Clips and staples are usually removed after three to 14 days depending on what surgery you've had. Don't pull the clips or staples.
- Glue may be used on smaller wounds and doesn't need removing. It usually peels off by itself in five to 10 days. You should try to keep the wound dry for about five days. Don't pick the glue off.

Dressings

A dressing protects the wound until it has healed and stops any stitches or clips from catching on your clothing. It also provides ideal conditions for healing and absorbs any leakage. Not all wounds need dressings.

You'll be told if your wound needs any further dressings. It's important that you don't remove your dressing unless you're told to.

Pain relief

If you've had a local anaesthetic, the effects will wear off after two to four hours. You may need some pain relief. You can use the tablets that have been prescribed or you can take paracetamol.

Don't take aspirin for pain as it can cause bleeding in some people. But if you normally take an aspirin a day, don't stop unless your doctor tells you to.



Swelling

Some swelling is normal. If your wound seems very swollen or the swelling is getting worse or causing problems, contact the surgery or clinic where you had your operation or procedure. If it's outside their opening hours, contact an after-hours service.

Bleeding

If your wound bleeds, press a clean cloth on the area for 15 minutes. Slowly release the pressure to check if the bleeding has stopped. If it keeps bleeding, reapply firm pressure. If it doesn't stop bleeding, contact the surgery or clinic where you had your operation or procedure. If it's outside their opening hours, contact an after-hours service.

Wound coming apart

Occasionally, the stitch line will break open. If this happens, don't be alarmed as it's quite easy to fix. Press a clean cloth over the wound and contact the surgery or clinic where you had your operation or procedure. The wound may need stitching again, or you may be told to let it heal without stitches. You don't need to go to an after-hours service if you can see your own doctor within 24 hours.

Wound healing

You'll see changes in the wound as it heals. It's normal to experience some of the following:

- stiffness and soreness, which will ease off after a few days
- tingling, numbness or itching
- a slightly hard, lumpy feeling as new tissue forms
- a slight pulling around the stitches as the wound heals.

Don't pick off any scabs, as they protect the new tissue under the wound and act as nature's dressing. They'll fall off on their own.

Problems with wound healing

Most wounds heal without any problems. There's a higher risk of developing wound infections if you smoke, have diabetes, a poor immune system or you've had a major operation such as bowel surgery.

Important

Contact your doctor or an after-hours service straight away if you develop a fever, feel unwell or your wound:

- becomes more painful
- looks red or swollen or feels hot.

Contact your doctor within 24 hours if your wound:

- has an unpleasant smell
- leaks a yellow or green discharge.

When the wound has healed

Gently massage a skin softening cream (called an emollient) or vitamin cream on the healed area to help keep it soft and supple. It's important to protect the healed area from the sun.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed June 2022.