

Care of open wounds

WHAT IS A WOUND?

Wounds can be classified as incisions (cuts), lacerations (rugged cuts) or abrasions (grazes or scratches).

- **Incisions** are usually caused by a sharp object slicing the skin, such as a knife or during an operation. Most incisions occur on the head, face or hands. There can be a lot of bleeding if the underlying blood vessels are affected. A deep incision can affect nerves, muscles, tendons and even bone. The doctor or nurse will have checked for damage to these structures.
- **Lacerations** are caused by blunt trauma that splits the skin (such as being hit with a cricket bat). They are rugged or rough (not neat or straight like a cut).
- **Abrasions** occur when the surface layer of the skin (epidermis) has been rubbed off or grazed. Knees, shins, ankles and elbows are most likely to be grazed because they are bony and have thin skin.
- If a wound has a lot of dirt and debris in it, the doctor or nurse may need to clean it out and leave it open for two or three days to reduce the chance of infection. In some cases, antibiotics or surgery may be needed.
- Some wounds will heal better if the edges are held together. The doctor or nurse may close the wound with special dressings (such as Steri-Strips), staples, stitches (sutures) or special glue. Other wounds (such as minor hand wounds) heal just as well with a simple dressing (such as a band-aid).
- Hospital glue (such as Dermabond) is quick and relatively painless to apply. The glue comes off by itself in one or two weeks, by which time the wound has healed. There is a small chance that the wound may open up before this.
- Special dressings called Steri-Strips may be left on for 10 days or until they fall off.
- How long stitches need to stay will depend on the type of wound and its position. Most stitches are removed after three to 10 days – a shorter time on the face and longer on the limbs. Your doctor or nurse will tell you when the stitches need to be removed. Make an appointment with your local doctor to have your stitches removed.

TREATMENT

Your treatment will depend on your injuries.

- There are different ways to dress or bandage a wound. The doctor or nurse will choose what is best for your injury. Simple uninfected wounds may be left open to allow them to dry and heal. Others need to be kept covered and moist to improve healing.
- Your wound will be thoroughly cleaned because dust and dirt can cause infection. This can be done safely with tap water. An x-ray may be needed to look for glass or other foreign objects that may be embedded in the wound or for damage to bones.

HOME CARE

- Your healthcare professional will advise what level of activity is appropriate. A sling or crutches may be advised in some cases depending on where your wound is located.
- Keep the wound clean and dry until it has healed. If your wound is closed but uncovered, you can wash or shower after 24 hours. Do not soak the wound in water and make sure it is dry afterwards (gently pat the area dry with a clean towel).

- If you have pain, take simple pain medication such as paracetamol or prescribed pain relief as directed. Check the label for the correct dose.
- If bandages or dressings get wet, they will need to be changed. If you cannot do this yourself, see your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- When it comes time to remove a dressing, it can be made easier by applying vegetable or olive oil to loosen sticky tapes, then wrapping the dressing in cling wrap. Alternatively, you can soak it with water or gently pull it off. Ask your doctor or nurse to show you.
- A crust (scab) will form over the wound. Do not pick off the crust because this can cause scarring and infection. The crust will fall off by itself.
- Once the skin has healed it will be fragile and need extra care and protection. Avoid the sun if possible. Use SPF 50+ sunscreen and wear protective clothing.

WILL I HAVE A SCAR?

All wounds leave a scar. At first, the scar will be red and thick, then over time it will become white, thin and smaller (sometimes almost invisible). The skin heals at different rates, depending on factors such as the person's general health, age, diet and whether or not the wound becomes infected. Some people may form a keloid scar, where the scar is thicker and raised. If this occurs, your doctor can advise treatment options for this type of scar.

WHAT TO EXPECT

All wounds will be painful (to varying degrees), swollen and red. They may bleed. Pain is usually mild and symptoms should ease in two to three days. Take simple pain medication such as paracetamol or whatever your healthcare professional has prescribed. If the pain is severe despite taking medication for pain, see your doctor.

TETANUS

Any cut, even a small one, can become infected with the bacteria (germs) that cause tetanus. Tetanus is a rare disease but can be fatal. These

bacteria are found in soil and animal faeces (poo). The risk is greatest in the young and the elderly. A tetanus booster (injection) should protect you for at least 10 years. If you have not had a tetanus booster in the past five years you may need a booster. Clean minor wounds do not need a tetanus booster. Your doctor or nurse will advise.

FIRST AID

If your wound begins to bleed again, add fresh dressings over the top of the old dressings and press down. These should be as clean as possible. If not, apply a clean sanitary pad or towel.

Apply pressure over the wound with your hands to stop the bleeding. Keep the pressure on for at least five minutes before checking if the bleeding has stopped. Try to raise the injured area above the level of your heart (for example, if your arm is injured then lift your arm up).

Call an ambulance (dial triple zero (000)) if the bleeding is severe. Otherwise, see your local doctor, return to the emergency department or urgent care centre.

FOLLOW-UP

Many wounds will need to be examined by your local doctor or healthcare professional. Your emergency or urgent care centre doctor or nurse will let you know if this is necessary. This is to check the wound is healing and to look for any signs of infection.

Signs of infection may include:

- increasing pain despite taking pain medication
- a warm, red and swollen wound or redness spreading to the surrounding skin
- surrounding skin becoming hot to touch or swollen, red or painful

- pus (yellow or greenish discharge) or an offensive smell
- a tender lump in the groin or armpit near the wound
- fever or flu-like symptoms
- the wound is not healing as expected.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems or any concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

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