Caring for surgical wounds at home

General information for patients and carers

This leaflet gives you information and advice about how to care for your healing surgical wound once you get home.

There are different types of surgical wounds. So it is important to follow any particular, specialist advice from your doctor or nurse when you leave hospital.

Surgical wounds

A surgical wound is the cut made into your skin by a doctor during an operation. At the end of the operation the cut is stitched internally and on the skin edges to allow it to heal. There is often nothing visible to see or to remove.

The skin edges usually form a seal within a couple of days after the operation but this can vary from person to person and depending on the type of operation you have had.

Your doctor may use special skin glue to close your wound and this also acts as a dressing. Although the glue is waterproof, you shouldn’t let your wound soak in water. The glue usually peels off by itself in 7-10 days. Sometimes metal clips and staples are used to close the skin edges together. These usually stay in for 5-14 days, depending on where they are and the type of operation you had.

Stitches, also known as sutures can be used. These can be dissolvable or non-dissolvable. Dissolvable stitches usually disappear in about 1-3 weeks, but it can take longer depending on the type you have. Non-dissolvable stitches are usually removed after 5-14 days, depending on where they are and the type of operation you had.

Some dressings can be a transparent film dressing and can be placed on a wound closed with dissolvable sutures. If you have this kind of dressing you can get the wound wet immediately after the dressing comes off on day five. Sometimes a shower can help to make the adhesive on the dressing easier to pull off the skin. However, some doctors prefer patients with sutures, clips or staples to keep the wound covered and dry until 48 hours after they are removed. Please speak to your doctor before being discharged so that you understand what their preference is.
Caring for your wound

Before removing a dressing, it is important to wash your hands with soap and water and to carefully take the dressing off. Try not to touch your wound. It is preferable to shower rather than bathe for a couple of weeks after your operation.

Do not put any soap, shower gel, body lotion, talcum powder or other bathing products directly onto the healing wound for about six weeks after your operation. We recommend that you pat the wound gently dry with a clean towel.

If you are told you need to have clips, staples or sutures removed, your local practice nurse or GP can do this. You will need to make the appointment. If you are unable to get to your GP surgery, a district nurse visit could be arranged by your GP practice.

Dressings

Some wounds may be left without a dressing, and this may be the preference of your doctor.

The purpose of a dressing is to:

- Absorb any leakage from the wound
- Provide ideal conditions for healing
- Protect the area until the wound is healed
- Prevent stitches, clips or staples from catching on clothing

Complications of wound healing

Most wounds heal without complications. However, a minority of wounds are complicated by infection; these are referred to as wound infections or surgical site infections. These occur when germs enter the wound and can delay normal wound healing. Wound infections are usually treated by dressing the wound regularly and may require a course of antibiotics. Sometimes further surgery is required.

Some swelling, heat and redness are to be expected around the wound after surgery, however if your wound becomes infected it may develop one or more of the following symptoms:

- Becomes more painful around the wound site
- Looks red and/or swollen around the wound site
- Feels hot around the wound site
- Weeps or leaks some blood-like liquid, pus or blood at the wound site
- Has an unpleasant odour from the wound site

Wound infections usually occur a few days after surgery but can occur up to several weeks afterwards. If you develop a high temperature, notice any of the above or have any concerns about your wound, then please contact your GP, unless you have been told to contact the hospital.
Contacts/further information
You can contact the ward you were discharged from by calling Addenbrooke’s Hospital: **01223 245151**

If you have any questions, please ask the healthcare team who will be happy to discuss this with you.

References/ Sources of evidence
NICE clinical guideline No 74: Surgical site infection (October 2008); Department of Health: High Impact Intervention No 4: Care bundle to preventing surgical site infection (August 2007)

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We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site.
For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

Other formats:

If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio, please ask the department where you are being treated, to contact the patient information team: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk.

Please note: We do not currently hold many leaflets in other languages; written translation requests are funded and agreed by the department who has authored the leaflet.

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