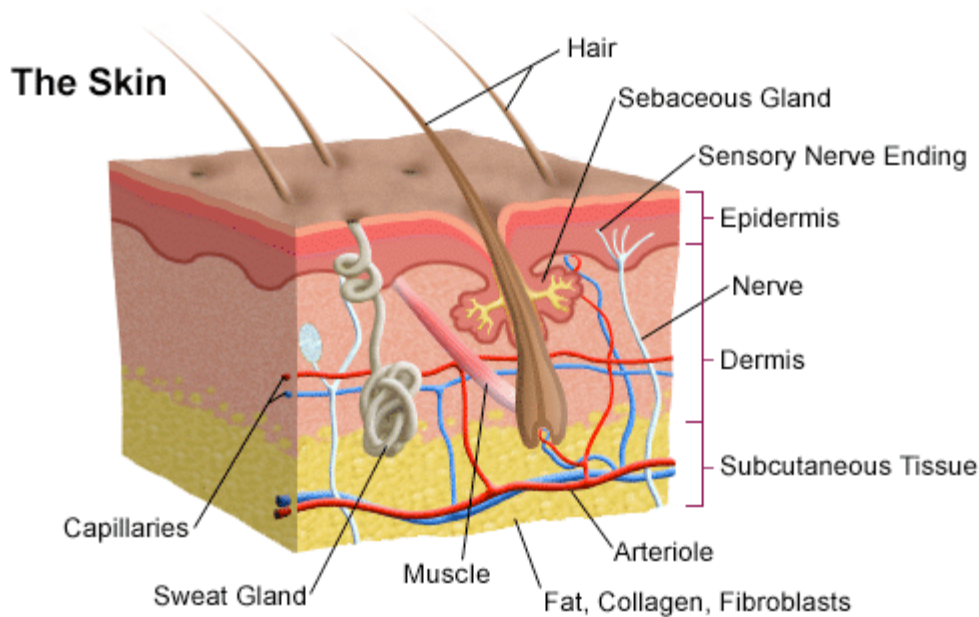


Wound Care



What is a wound?

The skin is the largest organ in the body and is designed to protect the inner structures of the body. The skin has 3 layers: the outer layer called the epidermis, the middle layer is known as the dermis, and the deep layer of subcutaneous tissue that is underneath. A wound occurs when there has been an injury to at least one of these layers. Wounds are typically caused by cuts, scrapes or abrasions, ulcers, burns, or infections. Ulcers to the skin are less common and may be caused by problems with your circulation.

If the injury is minor or superficial to the epidermis, then the ability of the skin to protect is not affected and the wound usually heals quickly and without scarring. Deeper wounds through the dermis may take longer to heal and you may have a more noticeable scar. Shallow or superficial wounds have less risk of scarring.

Your treatment in the emergency department

The health care provider in the department to determine how deep the wound is and whether or not the wound is clean or infected. You may have your temperature, pulse, and blood pressure taken to make sure that you are not getting sick from your wound. If your wound is infected an antibiotic may be given to you either by mouth or occasionally by intravenous if the infection is more serious.

There are many different types of dressings that can be applied to help your wound heal. There is no definite evidence that it is better to keep a simple wound open or to put a dressing on it. Sometimes wounds are left open if they are located in an area, like your scalp, that is difficult to dress. Sometimes dressings can act like a wick to absorb moisture or pus from a wound and some provide moisture to the wound to keep it from drying out. Sometimes wounds are covered with a pressure dressing to keep bruises called hematomas (he-ma-toe-ma) from developing. Some wounds, like those caused by burns,

are covered to help reduce the pain. Dressings can also protect the wound from being bumped accidentally.

Topical antibiotic ointment is sometimes used for treating wounds. Ointments provide a moist dressing and help keep dressings, if applied, from sticking to the wound.

Dressings may need to be applied anywhere from daily to only once every few days. The length of treatment depends on the size of the wound, the cause of the wound, whether or not you have other health issues such as diabetes, poor circulation, or kidney disease that slow healing. As we get older we also heal more slowly.

If you have a fresh wound we will try and reduce the chances of an infection developing by taking care to make sure the wound is properly cleaned and a dressing applied when that is needed. Unfortunately, taking antibiotics by mouth have not been shown to prevent an infection from developing in wounds. An infection happens in around 2 – 5% of patients who have a wound.

Certain factors can increase the chances that your wound might become infected. This includes being older, if you have diabetes, having a wound that has been crushed, if the wound is very ragged or star-shaped, and if the wound is very deep. The location of the wound is also important. Infections happen more in wounds that are located on your lower extremities than on your face.

Keeping the affected body part elevated whenever possible, especially early on, may improve wound healing. A splint may be offered to you if you have a wound over a joint and there is a risk that a lot of movement may keep the wound from healing quickly.

The use of vitamin E, aloe vera lotion may or may not help wound healing. Hydrogen peroxide and antiseptics are not helpful to help wounds heal more quickly. Sun exposure may cause healing skin to become slightly darker (pigmented) so you should keep this in mind for the first several weeks after a wound is healed. Normally it takes 6 – 12 months for a healed wound to take on its final appearance.

If you have a fresh wound and you have not had a tetanus immunization in the last 10 years the nurse or physician may offer this to you. Usually acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen is a good medication to take if you have pain. Occasionally, your health care provider will prescribe a stronger pain medication.

Your health care provider may suggest a follow up appointment for you to check to make sure the wound is healing well and/or for a dressing change. This may be at the emergency department, your family doctors office, or a walk in clinic. Complicated or infected wounds generally need to be rechecked in 48 – 72 hours. Smaller, clean wounds need follow up only if a problem develops.

Returning to the emergency department

You may be asked to return on regular basis for dressing changes. It is possible, in some cases, to make other arrangements with either a walk in clinic, your family doctor, or a home care nurse. Normally, most simple infections require a week to ten days of wound care. However, some lower leg and foot ulcers in diabetics may take 2 months or longer to heal. Sometimes we can give you few supplies to do your own dressing changes.

You should seek care either from your family physician or the emergency department if you are having increasing pain, redness, swelling or fever. These could be signs of an infection starting or getting worse.