

Dermatology

How can I look after my scar?

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

We designed this leaflet to give you useful general information about looking after scars. But it is not advice on your specific needs and circumstances. If you have more questions about your scar, please talk to your GP or contact the dermatology team.

About scars

Scars are an unavoidable result of skin surgery. We will make every effort to minimise and conceal scarring. However, everyone heals differently and wounds on certain parts of the body can heal differently.

Scars may take time to heal and in certain cases can become red, raised, and itchy. It is important to follow the post-operative instructions closely. Also, act quickly about any signs of infection or bleeding. This will improve the final appearance of the scar.

What is expected:

- localised itchiness, swelling and bruising around the wound site
- signs of bleeding on the dressing
- tenderness and possible bleeding when cleansing the wound in the first few days
- sharp pains on and off as the wound heals
- minor redness around the wound site, with no pain or fever
- scar appearing as pink at first. They should gradually blend in with skin over months to years. In different skin types the scar may be lighter (hypopigmented) or darker (hyperpigmented) than the surrounding skin

What is **not** expected:

- increasing redness, pain, discharge, or fever (suggesting a wound infection)
- significant bleeding that does not stop with pressure or extensive and progressive bruising
- severe pain, not relieved by taking regular paracetamol

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- wound splitting open (called 'dehiscence')
 - inability to raise or lower eyebrows, drooping of eyelids or corners of mouth after the local anaesthetic has worn off

If any of the above unexpected symptoms occur, contact your GP and the skin department right away. If you need help outside of normal working hours (09:00 to 17:00) please contact your GP's out-of-hours service or the emergency department.

In the first four weeks

- it is **essential** to keep the wound dry for the first 48 hours
- it is **important** to prevent your wound splitting open. This may cause a worse scar appearance
- follow the advice in your post-operative wound care leaflet. It says to avoid strenuous exercise or heavy lifting for at least two to four weeks
- if your stitches or sutures need removal, it is important to get this done at the right time, as advised by your surgeon

Steri-strips and other special dressings

If your surgery was in a place on your body which stretches, the surgeon may apply steri-strips to the wound. This prevents stretching and reduces tension at the site. These steri-strips should be removed when the dressing is removed. In some cases, the surgeon may advise you to reapply steri-strips onto the wound site for up to 2 months after surgery. These are over-the-counter products you can buy in pharmacies.

Moisturisation

After suture removal (if applicable), the wound should be healing well. It is important to regularly moisturise it to prevent drying or cracking. It is best to use non-perfumed hypo-allergenic moisturisers (for example, Cetraben) to prevent any itching or irritation at the site.

Apply this gently while the scar is fragile, ideally 3 to 4 times a day. It is important to fully clean the area of excess moisturiser regularly to prevent skin irritation.

Massage

Once the wound has healed you may wish to massage the scar with a moisturiser or lubricant (for example, oil). Scar massage may help prevent adhesions and soften the scar.

Do this in a slow, circular motion to the skin around the scar, using gentle pressure initially. Massaging can be done 3 to 4 times a day for 5 to 10 minutes.

Silicone therapy

Silicone therapy can help hydrate the scar. This will help it flatten and soften and reduce discomfort. This can be done with silicone gels. You can buy these over the counter in pharmacies. Apply to the scar twice daily after regular cleansing. It is important not to apply silicone on an unhealed or open wound. If a rash occurs, stop treatment with silicone.

After four weeks

The cosmetic appearance of the scar will continue to improve up to 18 months after the procedure.

Massage

You can massage your scar for 2 to 3 months. This helps soften the scar tissue and with the healing process.

Sun protection

Protect the scar from sunlight for up to 18 months post-surgery. A broad-spectrum SPF >30 is advisable.

Secondary intention wounds

If the wound was left open to heal, rather than stitched closed, it should heal naturally. This is called a secondary intention wound. The wound slowly fills in and closes from the bottom up.

Your doctor will advise the use of petroleum jelly (Vaseline) to stop the wound from drying out and forming a scab. This leads to a quicker recovery and better cosmetic result. At first, you will need to dress the wound regularly. Your surgeon will advise you about this.

If you have had a curettage and cautery procedure, your wound will heal in a similar way to a secondary intention wound. It will usually be much shallower. Apply petroleum jelly daily to hydrate the wound. Cover it with any form of sterile dressing (for example, plasters).

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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