

Caring for your surgical wound

This leaflet has been written to give you information and advice on caring for your surgical wound both prior to and after your surgery

Surgical wounds

A surgical wound is the cut made into the skin by the surgeon during the operation. At the end of the operation, the skin is stitched back together to allow the skin edges to come together and heal. This is done with stitches, steri-strips or adhesive dressings (glue).

The skin usually forms a seal within a day or two of the operation. The time this takes varies from person to person and is dependent on what sort of operation you have had. In healthy people, most wounds heal within a couple of weeks but again this can vary.

Dressings

Not all surgical wounds require a dressing. The purpose of a dressing is to:

- Absorb any fluid weeping from the wound
- Provide the best conditions for healing
- Protect the area as your wound heals
- Apply pressure (if required)

Stiches, clips and staples

The medical term for stitches is sutures. Other methods that may be used to close the wound include adhesive dressings (glue), steri-strips or tapes.

Some stitches are dissolvable and will typically disappear within four to eight weeks, depending on the type. Others will need to be removed by the GP or practise nurse, as well as any clips or staples. When depends on the type of operation you have had and where the stitches are. Staff on the ward will provide you with further information about this prior to discharge and arrange a follow up appointment for their removal in the community.

If you have stitches, you may see small pieces of the stitch material poking out of your wound – do not be tempted to pull on these. Usually, they will dissolve or be cut away by your nurse. As your skin heals, it is natural for your stitches and wound to itch – it is part of the healing process. Try not to scratch the area and do not apply any moisturiser or ointment on your skin to try and reduce the irritation.

Wound healing complications

Most surgical wounds will heal without causing any problems or complications; however, it is possible that your wound may become infected following surgery – where germs have begun to grow in the wound, which typically delays the normal healing process. This is referred to as a 'surgical site infection (SSI)'. If you develop an infection, you will usually be given a course of antibiotics and occasionally, may need to have a further procedure such as surgery or drainage. You have an increased risk of developing infection if you:

- Smoke
- Have diabetes
- Are overweight or obese
- Have a condition that affects your immune system, such as leukaemia
- Are undergoing a treatment that affects your immune system, such as chemotherapy

A SSI can develop at any point, from two to three days after surgery, until the wound has healed (usually two to three weeks after the operation). It is therefore crucial that you know the different signs and symptoms to look out for when you go home:

- Increased pain
- The skin around your wound becomes more tender, sore, red and swollen or feels hot
- Your wound has a green or yellow coloured discharge (pus) or blood
- An unpleasant smell
- You generally feel unwell or feverish, or you have a temperature

If you have noticed any of the above symptoms or are generally worried about the appearance of your wound, please speak to your GP or practise nurse. If you develop symptoms whilst in hospital, your nurse will take a swab to be sent to the laboratory for testing

Steps you can take prior to surgery to help prevent infection

Showering: you are advised to have a shower or a bath using soap, either the day before, or on the day of surgery.

Hair removal: hair at the site of the operation should not be removed by razor or waxing in the week before surgery as this can increase the risk of infection by damaging the skin surface. If it is necessary to remove hair, this will be done safely at the time of surgery.

Staying warm: keeping warm before surgery will lower the risk of complications like infection. Bring additional clothing to help keep comfortably warm before and after surgery. Tell staff if you feel cold at any time during your hospital stay

Taking care of your wound

Your nurses and doctors will do all they can to prevent a SSI, however it is important that you know what you can do yourself to help prevent infection and to promote healing.

Changing your dressing

The original dressing will be in place for a minimum of 48 hours before your nurse removes and assesses the site. If required, another dressing will be applied for a minimum of 72 hours. If you go home with a dressing in place, it is important that you know how to remove and change the dressing if necessary and what to look out for on your wound site. If the wound is healing it can be left without a dressing, however you may prefer to have a dressing to cover the wound for protection, especially if your clothing can rub against it.

- Wash your hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly before removing the dressing
- Carefully take off the dressing whilst trying not to touch the healing wound with your fingers
- Put the used dressing straight in the bin
- You might then be able to leave your wound without a dressing
- If you require another dressing, apply carefully taking care not touch the inside of the new dressing

Please be advised to continue using only the dressings supplied to you by the hospital or GP/practise nurse. If you do have any concerns about the current dressing you are using, please contact your GP

Bathing and showering

You will typically be advised to wait 48 hours post-surgery to shower safely. After 48 hours, a surgical wound can get wet without increasing the risk of infection; however, it depends upon the type of operation. Your doctor/nurse will advise you specifically. When bathing/showering, there are some important points to consider:

- If possible, have showers rather than baths. It is important not to soak your wound too much as this may soften the scar tissue, causing the skin edges to open up. Only take a bath if you are sure, you can keep the wound dry.
- Some waterproof dressings can be left in place whilst you take a bath or shower, while others may need to be removed beforehand. Your nurse will advise you depending on what dressing you have.
- Do not put any soap, shower gel, body lotion, talcum powder or other bathing products directly onto your healing wound. This may cause discomfort and encourage an infection. You can gently wash the surrounding skin with mild non-scented soap though.
- You can let the shower water gently splash onto the healing wound, however, do not rub the area as this may be painful and could delay the healing process.
- Pat the wound dry gently with a clean towel after showering/bathing.

Eating and drinking properly

Your body will need energy and the right nutrients to heal quickly, so it is important to eat well:

- Eating a healthy well-balanced diet with plenty of variety including lean meat, fish, eggs, dairy, fruit, and vegetables should give you all the nutrients you need for your wound to heal. Please visit the NHS website for advice relating to specific nutritional requirements/diets including vegetarian and vegan diets.
- Vitamin C and protein in particular are important to wound healing.
- Be sure to drink plenty of water – if you are dehydrated it may take longer for your wound to heal.
- You don't normally need to take supplements if you were in good health before surgery and you recover normally.

Being overweight can increase the time it takes for your wound to heal and significantly increases your risk of wound infection. If you have diabetes, it is important to take care that your blood sugar is well controlled.

Where can I get further information about infections in hospital?

The Public Health England website www.hpa.org.uk has a section on surgical wound infections which includes the latest report.

More information about surgical wound infections can be found in the guideline on the Prevention and Treatment of Surgical Site Infection published by the National Institute for health and Clinical Excellence in 2008 and can be found online at www.nice.org.uk.

If you have concerns regarding infection or infection prevention, please speak to the nurse looking after you. You can also discuss your concerns with a matron or a member of the Infection Prevention and Control Team on 0151 702 4014.

This leaflet can be made available in different formats on request. If you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, then please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at pals@lwh.nhs.uk

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