

**This leaflet is written for patients by patients and is based on experience and medical information.**

It aims to answer general questions about how to take care of your surgical wound, to help your wound heal and reduce the chance of it getting infected.

Note: It's important to follow the individual advice you're given by your healthcare professional after your operation or procedure.

## Surgical Wounds

### What is a surgical wound?

A surgical wound is a cut made to your skin and tissues during an operation. Usually, after your surgeon finishes your operation, they'll secure the edges of the cut. They may do this with:

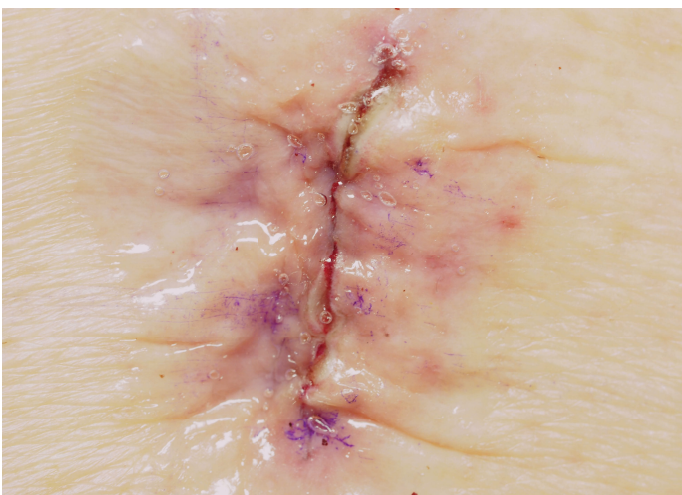
- Stitches (sutures).
- Staples (metal clips).
- Adhesive strips.
- Skin glue.

The method your surgeon uses will depend on where your wound is, how big it is and how strong the closure needs to be.

### Surgical wound dressings

Not every surgical wound requires a dressing but if you do need one, its purpose is to:

- Absorb any fluid weeping from your wound.
- Provide the best conditions for healing.
- Protect the area as your wound heals.



Your healthcare professional will tell you how to care for a surgical wound at home. This will include when you should change or remove the dressing. The original dressing may be left in place for around two to three days to give the wound time to start healing. When you remove the dressing:

- Wash your hands prior to touching the dressing.
- Do not touch or squeeze the wound.
- Don't use antiseptic or any unprescribed cream under the dressing. These creams may cause harm rather than help the wound heal.

If the wound is healing, it can be left without a dressing. You might like to keep one over the area for protection and comfort, for example, if your clothes are rubbing against it. You may be given replacement dressings to use at home. It is common for a healing wound to itch - do not be tempted to scratch it! If you are concerned, ask your healthcare professional.

## Stitches / Staples

Dissolving stitches will disappear as the wound heals. If you see or feel the end of the stitches sticking out, please do not pull on them. If the stitches need to be removed, you will be given specific instructions. Non-dissolvable stitches and staples will need to be removed by a healthcare professional.

## Adhesive Strips / Skin Glue

Adhesive strips stick to your skin. They'll usually come off by themselves after a week to 10 days. Skin glue is waterproof, but it's best to keep it dry. Don't use creams or lotions over the glue, and don't pick at it or rub it. The glue usually peels off by itself in about two weeks so you don't need to return to the hospital to have it removed.

## Can I bathe or shower?

Ask your healthcare professional if you can have a shower or bath, and how long you should keep your wound dry. Always follow their advice - they'll know what's best in your circumstances. When you are able to wash, here are some tips:

- ▶ Showering is better than bathing. Soaking the wound can soften the tissue. Only have a bath if you can keep the wound out of the water.
- ▶ Remove any dressing before you have a bath or shower, unless your healthcare professional gives you different advice. Some dressings are waterproof and can be left on.
- ▶ You can gently wash the area surrounding your wound with mild soap. Don't use soap or any products such as shower gel, body lotion or talc directly over your wound.
- ▶ You can let the shower water gently splash onto your healing wound. But don't rub the area, as this might be painful and could delay the healing process.
- ▶ Carefully dry your wound after showering. You might dab with a clean towel.

## Wound complications

Most surgical wounds will heal without any problems. But it's possible that your wound may become infected after surgery. A surgical wound infection can develop at any point (up to several months after). Signs that you may have a wound infection include:

- ▶ The wound becoming more painful.
- ▶ Redness in and around the wound.
- ▶ Leaking of blood or pus from the wound.
- ▶ Swelling of the wound - an abscess (a collection of pus) may have formed.
- ▶ An unpleasant smell coming from the wound.
- ▶ Having a raised temperature.

Don't worry if there's a bit of oozing from your wound within the first few hours. Other complications can include the wound gaping open, or some of the stitches or staples coming away. However, if you have any of these symptoms or are worried about how your wound looks, please seek advice from your GP surgery or healthcare professional, unless you have been told to contact the hospital.

**Wound infections/openings respond better when treatment is started earlier - if you have any concerns, contact your healthcare professional.**



For more information, scan this QR code or visit [nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/nwvsp-publications-and-resources](https://nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/nwvsp-publications-and-resources)



A programme commissioned by NHS England.

© National Wound Care Strategy Programme (NWVSP) 2024.  
Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes.  
Any other copying requires the permission of the publishers.