

Acute wound care



Burns, cuts, grazes, or accidents and falls in the home or on sports fields can damage the skin and cause wounds. The time a wound takes to heal depends on the size and depth of the wound, how well it has been cleaned and cared for, and which products have been used to protect the wound, as well as the patient's general health. Wounds that take longer than expected to heal are called chronic wounds.

When a wound first happens you should apply 'first aid' to control the bleeding, and then assess the extent of the wound. Appropriate wound care, once the bleeding is controlled, can significantly speed the rate of healing and minimise scar formation.

Symptoms

When an acute wound first occurs there can be bleeding, pain and a burning and stinging sensation. Chronic wounds however, are not always painful or may not continue to bleed.

The colour and appearance of wounds depends on the stage of healing. A pale red or pink colour suggest it is healing. Wounds that look yellow, green or black, or have an increasing level of pain, redness and/or swelling should be assessed by a health care professional.

Causes

Wounds can occur almost anytime and anywhere, most commonly caused by cuts, bumps, burns and scrapes against everyday household or workplace objects.

People with some medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, undergoing cancer treatment or immune conditions) or who take some medicines (e.g. steroids, anti-inflammatory medicines) can often have delayed wound healing and should speak to a health professional.

Lifestyle options

To assist with wound healing:

- Wash your hands before and after cleaning the wound to prevent infection.
- Clean the wound before dressing it.
- Ask your pharmacist how often to clean the wound or change the dressing, as some wounds should not be disturbed unnecessarily.
- Speak to your health care professional if you are worried about your nutrition and how this might affect your wound healing.
- Keep your vaccinations up-to-date (especially tetanus boosters).

Cleaning the wound

Use saline or tap water to clean the wound and remove any foreign material like dirt or sand. Gently flush the wound with the liquid and avoid rubbing or scrubbing, as this can further damage the wound area. Seek medical advice if you are having trouble removing debris from your wound, or the bleeding will not stop.

Antiseptics can be used when wounds first happen if there is dirt or grease in the wound. Only use those recommended by your pharmacist or other health professional, because some antiseptics may not be effective and can harm the skin tissues. Liquid antiseptics are the most effective. Incorrect use of creams, ointments or powders can change the healing environment, and slow down the healing time. For example:

- Povidone-Iodine – Rinse it off 3-4 minutes after application to avoid damaging the healthy tissue. Avoid iodine if you have thyroid disease, an allergy to iodine, a serious kidney disease, are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Pharmacy options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, so they can provide advice that is most suitable for you.

Your pharmacist can recommend a suitable wound dressing. Investing in the most appropriate dressing, which may be more expensive, will often be cheaper and less painful in the long term as the wound may require fewer dressing changes, heal faster and cause less scarring.

Moist wound healing

It used to be thought good practice to let a scab form on a wound. Medical research has found that scabs actually slow down healing, increase pain, risk of infection and scarring.

Not letting a wound dry out ('moist wound healing') helps control the wound environment and wounds will heal faster, with less pain and scarring, and have a reduced risk of infection.

A wound dressing that provides an optimal healing environment will depend upon the type of wound. Some features that may be desirable are a dressing that:

- is water proof so you can shower or bath without changing the dressing
- keeps the germs or bacteria out to reduce the risk of infection
- lets oxygen into the wound to promote healing
- cushions, insulates and protects the wound from further damage
- requires changing less often (perhaps every 3 to 7 days), which means it is more convenient and reduces disruption to the wound site.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable option for you.

See a doctor if:

- there is continual bleeding, pus or discharge from the wound
- the wound is very painful
- you develop a fever
- the skin around the wound is warmer or hot, and looks swollen and red
- the colour of the wound is changing to green or black
- the wound starts to smell bad.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

Wound Australia:
www.woundaware.com.au/resources

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

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