

PATIENT EDUCATION: WOUND CARE

After surgery, you will need to take care of the incision as it heals. Doing so may limit scarring, may help you avoid pain or discomfort, and may help lower the risk of problems like infection.

Your doctor used stitches, staples, tissue glue, or tape strips to close the incision. And you will need to keep the area clean, change the dressing according to your doctor's instructions, and watch for signs of infection.

Tips for reducing the risk of infection

To reduce the risk of infection:

- Ask your doctor how long you need to keep the area dry. Follow your doctor's instructions exactly.
- Look at the incision every day, checking for signs of infection (see below).
- Change the dressing as your doctor recommends.

Do not:

- Scrub or rub incisions.
- Remove the tape strips (such as Steri-Strips) from incisions unless your doctor tells you to.
- Use lotion or powder on incisions.
- Expose incisions to sunlight.
- Take a bath unless you can keep the incision dry. Instead, take showers or sponge baths until your doctor says it's okay to take baths. Before you shower, cover the dressing with a plastic bag or use another method of keeping it dry.

You may notice some soreness, tenderness, tingling, numbness, and itching around the incision. There may also be mild oozing and bruising, and a small lump may form. This is normal and no cause for concern.

Signs of infection

Call your doctor if you notice signs of an infection, such as:

- A yellow or green discharge that is increasing.
- A change in the odor of the discharge.
- A change in the size of the incision.
- Redness or hardening of the surrounding area.
- The incision is hot to the touch.
- Fever.
- Increasing or unusual pain.

- Excessive bleeding that has soaked through the dressing.

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Changing a dressing

Before you start, make sure you have gauze pads, a box of medical gloves, surgical tape, a plastic bag, and scissors. Then:

1. Prepare supplies by opening the gauze packages and cutting new tape strips.
2. Put on medical gloves.
3. Loosen the tape around the old dressing.
4. Remove the old dressing.
5. Remove the gloves. At this point, clean the incision if your doctor told you to do so. (See instructions below.)
6. **Wash your hands**, and put on another pair of medical gloves.
7. Inspect the incision for signs of infection.
8. Hold a clean, sterile gauze pad by the corner and place over the incision.
9. Tape all four sides of the gauze pad.
10. Put all trash, including gloves, in a plastic bag.
11. Seal plastic bag and throw it away.
12. Wash your hands.

Cleaning an incision

To clean the incision:

- Gently wash it with soap and water to remove the crust.
- Do not scrub or soak the wound.
- Do not use rubbing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, or iodine, which can harm the tissue and slow wound healing.
- Air-dry the incision or pat it dry with a clean, fresh towel before reapplying the dressing.

Caring for stitches, staples, tissue glue, or adhesive strips

Stitches or staples normally cause some redness and swelling where the stitch enters the skin, along with mild irritation and itching. Some drainage from the incision may be expected for the first few days after surgery. But if the discharge does not decrease after a few days, becomes bright red with blood, or contains pus, contact your doctor.

The incisions may be protected with tissue glue or small adhesive strips (such as Steri-Strips) instead of a dressing or bandage. If glue was used, be sure to dry the incision area right away if it gets wet. The glue will fall off on its own after a bit of time. If adhesive strips were used, leave them in place until they become loose or fall off on their own.

Other incision care tips

After some surgeries, you may be given special instructions other than these for taking care of the incision. Be sure to follow those instructions carefully. If you are confused by the instructions or you have a question, call your doctor's office. If the office is closed, leave a message with the answering service. If your pain has increased or you suspect you may have an infection, call your doctor as soon as possible.

Don't expose your incision to direct sun for 3 to 9 months after surgery. As an incision heals, the new skin that is formed over the cut is very sensitive to sunlight and will burn more easily than normal skin. Bad scarring could occur if the new skin gets sunburned.