

Caring for your surgical wound

Information and advice for patients

Plastic surgery

What is a surgical wound?

A surgical wound or surgical site is the cut/incision in the skin made by a surgeon to carry out a surgical procedure.

Your wound may have been closed using sutures (stitches), dissolvable sutures, clips (staples), steristrips or medical skin glue. How your wound was closed depends on the type of surgery you have had.

How do I care for my surgical wound?

Wound closures

- **Medical glue** - This does not need to be removed; it will lift off by itself when the wound has healed. Do not pick the glue off.
- **Steristrips** - You will be told when steristrips need to be removed and who by. If you have been told to remove them yourself this should be done by lifting one end of the steristrip as far as the wound edge and then lifting the other end of the steristrip as far as the wound edge.
- **Sutures (stitches) and clips** - Do not pull your sutures or clips. Dissolvable sutures will disappear themselves. Sutures, clips and staples that need to be removed will be removed by a nurse, usually between 5 and 21 days after surgery. You will be given an appointment for this.

Dressings

Your wound may be covered with a sterile dressing. The dressing is there to protect your wound, absorb any leakage from it and help it to heal. It is very important that you do not remove your dressing until instructed to do so.

Most dressings can stay in place for 1 week after surgery, but will need to be changed if the wound starts oozing and the dressing becomes wet from blood or other liquid. Do not change the dressing yourself; contact the specialist nurses or the ward you were discharged from.

Bathing and showering

You will be advised when you can have a bath or shower after your operation. It is better to have a shower rather than a bath so that your wound doesn't soak in water, as this can make the wound tissue softer and more likely to re-open and become infected.

Before having a bath or shower cover your wound or dressing with a waterproof covering such as a plastic bag or rubber glove.

You should not touch your wound and should always make sure you wash your hands after using the toilet.

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Leaving hospital

Before you are discharged from hospital the nurse will give you specific instructions about caring for your wound. You will also be given an appointment to attend the plastic surgery nurse-led clinic in the outpatient department. The nurse will review your wound and remove any wound closures necessary.

Why is it important to follow this advice?

It is important to follow the advice above, and any advice given to you by your nurse in order to prevent your surgical wound from becoming infected. If bacteria from the environment or your skin enters your wound it can cause a wound infection.

A surgical wound infection can develop from 2 days - 3 weeks after surgery. Sometimes an infection can occur several months after an operation, but this is not very common. If you develop a surgical wound infection, how it is treated will depend on the severity of the infection. It may be treated by regularly changing dressings, with antibiotics or in some cases with further surgery.

Some people are more likely to develop wound infections than others. Those at higher risk include people who:

- smoke
- have diabetes
- have a condition or treatment that affects their immune system, such as leukaemia or chemotherapy
- have had a major operation

What are the symptoms of a surgical wound infection?

The symptoms of a surgical wound infection are:

- red or sore skin around the wound that is spreading
- high temperature (38°C and above)

AND any 1 of the following:

- heat around the wound
- swelling around the wound
- a yellow or green coloured discharge (pus) from the wound
- unpleasant smell from the wound
- feeling unwell

If you have any of these symptoms while you are in hospital please speak to the nurse looking after you. If you develop any of these symptoms after you have been discharged home please contact the specialist nurses or the ward you were discharged from.

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How to care for your scar

Scarring is an important part of the healing process after a wound has healed and it usually takes at least 1 year for a scar to settle. How your scar appears will depend on where it is on your body, your age and how prone you are to developing noticeable scars.

Sometimes scar tissue can become thick and lumpy and restrict movement. Massaging your scar 2 – 3 times a day with a non-perfumed moisturising cream such as E45, aqueous or Vaseline can help to reduce this. To massage your scar, apply firm pressure to it using the tip of your thumb and move in a circular motion so that the scar moves. Do not massage open wounds.

If your wound re-opens, becomes sore or red, stop massaging and contact the plastic surgery specialist nurses.

Instructions for patients who have had hand surgery

- Use your hand for light activities if your doctor has advised you to do so.
- Do not lift any heavy objects.
- If you have been given a high arm sling, take your hand out of the sling a few times each hour to move your elbow and shoulder.
- When you are not using your hand keep it elevated by resting it on your chest, near the shoulder on the opposite side.
- Sleep with your hand elevated on pillows, higher than the level of your heart.

If you have a cast or splint you will be given further instructions by your doctor, nurse of hand therapist.

Contact details

Plastic Surgery Specialist Nurses

Contact the hospital switchboard on 0121 553 1831 and ask them to bleep the specialist nurses on 6288 or 6034.

Lyndon 3 ward

0121 507 3919

Newton 2 ward

0121 507 3351

Plastic Surgery Consultant's Secretaries

0121 507 3455 (Mr Khanna)

0121 507 3939 (Mr Lahiri)

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Further information

For more information about our hospitals and services please visit our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk and www.swbhengage.com, follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, CG74 'Surgical site infection: Prevention and treatment of surgical site infection', October 2008
- Journal of Community Nursing, 'Wound management', March/April 2011

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5420 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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