

Wound care – skin tears

What is a skin tear?

You have sustained a skin tear. When a doctor assesses your wound they will decide on the best method to achieve optimal healing based on a number of factors including your pre-existing health, general condition of your skin, the location, size or depth of the wound, and whether it is subject to tension (e.g. a wound across a joint). Treatment options include adhesive strips or specialised dressings for simple skin tears, or surgical treatment for deep or complicated wounds.

Treatment

Skin tears are cleaned, with any blood under the skin flap removed. It is important not to pull off loose, rolled up or shrivelled up pieces of skin as it is often possible to carefully stretch the skin back in place over the torn area much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. It is then held in place with adhesive strips or specialised dressings.

Modern dressings are specially designed to maintain the skin in the right position, allow ooze to be mopped up, and provide a moist healing environment. This promotes faster healing and less scarring. These dressings are designed to only be changed every 3-7 days. If the wound is oozing a lot, the dressing can be changed more frequently.

The part of the body where the skin tear is located is sometimes splinted initially to limit movement to help the skin will 'stick down' and 'take'.

Keep the dressing clean and dry.

Healing

In the first few days, the wound may be slightly red, tender or swollen; this is the same for all wounds. These symptoms should settle and resolve as the wound starts to heal. During this time, you may need some pain relief (such as paracetamol) and to rest the wound area when possible to encourage the skin to 'stick down'.

You will be instructed to go to your GP or come back to the emergency department in 3-5 days to check if:

- There amount of ooze is excessive, in which case the dressing will need more frequent changing
- There is any evidence of infection. All wounds have a small risk of infection. If the wound begins to look more red, painful or discharges pus, then return to Cabrini ED at any time for further care.

- The wound is starting to heal and the skin is 'taking'. The best result is if the skin becomes part of the final healed wound. Sometimes the skin does not 'take' but is effective in acting as a temporary cover while the wound heals underneath. Less commonly, the wound may not heal. In this situation, other options including surgery and skin grafting may need to be pursued.

If becoming infected, signs usually start developing two to three days after the injury and may include:

- Increasing pain despite taking painkillers
- A warm, red, and swollen or painful wound or surrounding skin
- Pus (yellow or greenish discharge) or an offensive smell
- A tender lump in the groin or armpit
- Fever (temperature over 37.5°C in adults or 38°C in children) or flu-like symptoms
- The wound is not starting to heal (after about five days)

Skin tears often take from weeks to months to heal, and may need regular dressing changes. Patients are often able to perform their own dressing changes once healing is underway. As the wound heals it is important to avoid early sun exposure as this will potentially break down the scar line or make it painful.

All wounds leave a scar regardless of the method used to close it. At first, the scar may be red and thickish, then over the next six months it will become white, thin and smaller (sometimes almost invisible). The skin heals at different rates, depending on factors such as the person's general health, age, diet and whether the wound becomes infected.

Preventing skin tears in the future

1. Optimise the treatment of medical conditions such as diabetes
2. Ensure adequate fluid intake and eat a balanced diet as dry skin is more prone to cracking and breaking
3. Try a soap-free cleanser to avoid drying out the skin
4. Moisturise the skin regularly
5. Ensure fingernails and toenails are trimmed regularly
6. Protect areas of fragile skin with clothing

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Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au