Intermountain Health

Chronic Wound Care: Home Instructions

What is a chronic wound?

A wound is any break in the skin or deep tissue. Normally the skin heals quickly on its own. Wounds that don't heal easily are called **chronic wounds.** They require special care to heal.

Chronic wounds can result from:

- Surgical wounds that reopen
- Skin that breaks down when there's too much pressure over a bony area (pressure ulcers)
- Injury to the feet or legs from poor circulation (arterial or venous ulcers)
- Loss of circulation and feeling due to diabetes (diabetic ulcers)

Why isn't my wound healing faster?

Bacteria (germs) can slow healing. With open wounds, it's easy for common bacteria from your skin to get inside. This is called **contamination**.

Contamination can sometimes lead to infection. **Infection** means the bacteria *are* reproducing. The germs are invading the soft tissue and preventing healing.

Other factors that slow wound healing include:

- Poor nutrition
- Smoking
- Obesity
- Certain diseases, such as diabetes or diseases of the liver, kidney, or lungs
- Certain treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiation



A clean dressing will keep your wound warm and moist and protect it from germs.

How can I help my wound heal?

To help heal faster, keep your wound **clean, warm, and moist.** This will make it easier for new tissue to grow. Here's what you should do:

- **Wash your hands.** The most important thing you and your caregivers can do to prevent infection is wash your hands. You can use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. Wash before and after touching your wound.
- **Keep a clean dressing on your wound.** Dressings keep germs out and protect the wound from injury. They also help absorb fluid that drains from the wound that could damage the skin around it.
- **Be careful.** Protect the wound from physical injury. Don't let anything touch it or bump it.
- **Eat right.** Eating the right foods gives your body the building blocks it needs to heal. A list of foods for good wound healing is found on **page 4**.

Changing your dressing

Keeping a clean dressing on your wound will help it heal. Your healthcare providers can show you how to change your dressing and let you know how long to keep each dressing on. They may recommend specific products to use.

To change your dressing, use the following steps.

Prepare

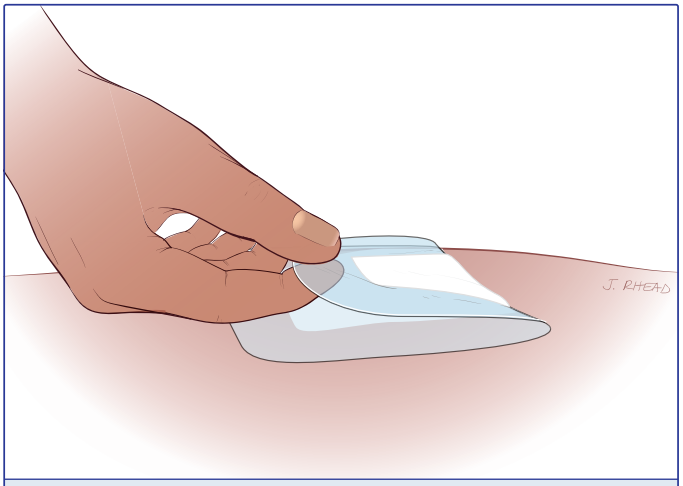
- **Clean your work area**
- **Gather your supplies,** including:
  - Non-sterile gloves
  - Adhesive remover
  - Gauze sponges or pads
  - Saline solution
  - Plastic trash bag
  - Gauze wrap or dressing
  - No-sting skin barrier film
  - Skin prep
  - Scissors
  - Tape
  - Other dressings
  - Medicine

About saline solution

Saline, also called saline solution, is sterile salt water. It can have different amounts of salt in it. "Normal" saline has about 0.9% salt. You can make it or buy it.

Making saline solution

- Get a clean storage container and mixing utensil. Either wash them in the dishwasher or boil them for 5 minutes.
- Use 1 quart (4 cups) of distilled water, or boil 1 quart of tap water for 5 minutes. Do not use well water or sea water.
- Add 2 teaspoons of table salt.
- Mix the water and salt well until the salt is completely dissolved.
- Cool to room temperature before using.
- Saline solution can be stored at room temperature in a tightly covered glass or plastic bottle. You can keep it for up to one week. Always label it and include the date.



When removing the dressing, lift the tape across the skin. Don't pull the dressing straight up.

Remove the old dressing

- **Wash your hands** with soap and warm water or an alcohol-based hand rub.
- **Put on the gloves** if they are recommended.
- **Slowly lift the corners** or edges of the dressing or tape. If it sticks to the skin, dab the edges with an adhesive remover, a moistened gauze pad, or a moistened paper towel.
- **Remove the tape or dressing.** Start by holding down the skin surrounding the bandaged area. Slowly lift the tape across the skin rather than pulling away from the skin. (See picture above.)
- **Move towards the center of the wound** as you lift the edges of the dressing. Then gently lift it from the wound.
- **Soak the dressing with saline solution** if the dressing sticks to the wound. This will help loosen it.
- **Throw away the old dressing into a plastic trash bag** and tie it closed. Put that bag into a second plastic bag and throw it away.
- **Remove and throw away the gloves.**
- **Wash your hands again.**

Clean the wound

After you remove the dressing, you may see a thick, yellow, gummy film over your wound. This is good. It means the dressing is keeping the wound moist, which helps it to heal. Gently wash it off when you change the dressing.

To clean the wound, follow these steps:

- **Put on new gloves.**
- **Place a towel under the wound.**
- **Gently clean the wound.** Wet a gauze sponge or pad with saline or water and follow these steps:
  - Start at the center of the wound. Dab in circles out to 1 inch past the edge of the wound. Do not go from the outer edges of the wound back toward the center. This could spread germs into the wound.
  - Be sure to clean away any liquid that is draining from the wound.
  - Throw out your cloth or gauze and get a new one as often as needed.
- **Rinse the wound** again with a new gauze pad to remove any loose debris not removed by the first cleaning.
- **Discard the cleaning materials** into the plastic trash bag.
- **Dry the skin** surrounding the wound by patting it with a soft, clean towel.
- **Check the wound** for redness, drainage, swelling, or odor. These are signs of infection.
  - New tissue at the bottom of the wound should be light red or pink and look lumpy or glossy. Do not disturb this tissue. It is very fragile and will bleed easily.

Apply a new dressing

- **Open the new dressing** and remove it from the package. Touch only the corners of the dressing. Cut it to size if necessary.
- **Apply a skin barrier** to the skin around the wound.
- **Center the dressing** over the wound.
- **Secure the dressing** in place with tape.
- **Remove and discard the gloves.**
- **Wash your hands.**

When should I call my doctor?

The following symptoms could mean that your wound is infected and you need to contact your healthcare provider:

- Increased pain at the wound site
- Redness or swelling around or spreading out from the wound site
- The wound site or surrounding area feels warm to the touch
- Foul odor coming from the wound after the wound has been cleaned
- Any change in color or amount of drainage from the wound
- Fever or chills, nausea or vomiting.

Notes

Eating to help you heal

Injuries and wounds put extra demands on your body. To heal, your body will need extra calories and nutrients, which will come from eating the right foods. Nutrients and foods that promote healing include:

- **Protein.** Protein is a major building block for muscle and skin repair. It also helps boost immunity. **Eat 3 to 4 servings per day.** (One serving is 3 to 4 ounces.) Good sources of protein include:
  - Lean animal meat such as beef, pork, chicken, or fish
  - Dried beans, peas, lentils, or tofu
  - Nuts, peanut butter, or seeds
  - Cheese, yogurt, or eggs
- **Carbohydrates**. Carbohydrates supply the energy your body needs to heal. Good choices include:
  - Whole grain breads and cereals
  - Potatoes, rice, or pasta
  - A variety of fruits and vegetables
  - Foods with vitamin A, such as bright orange fruits and vegetables, and dark green, leafy vegetables
  - Foods with vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, peppers, tomatoes, strawberries, cantaloupe, and broccoli
- **Milk and dairy products.** These are good sources of both carbohydrates and protein. Unless your doctor says not to eat dairy, be sure to include at least 3 servings per day. One serving of milk or yogurt is one cup. Soy milk can be substituted for regular milk.
- **Water.** Water replaces fluid lost with draining wounds. Make sure you drink about 6 to 8 cups of liquids each day, unless your doctor tells you otherwise.

Be sure to get enough healthy foods

Some people have trouble eating enough at meals to promote wound healing. These ideas may help:

- **Eat smaller meals more often.** It may be easier to eat 6 small meals per day rather than 3 larger meals.
- **Eat healthy snacks.** Get more of the nutrition you need by snacking between meals on healthy foods such as:
  - Cheese and crackers
  - Cottage cheese and fruit
  - Half a sandwich and a small piece of fruit
  - Peanut butter or nuts and sliced apples
  - Granola bars and fresh fruit
- **Eat a well-balanced diet.** You can get the vitamins and minerals you need from eating a well-balanced diet. Be sure to eat at least 1 serving per day of lean red meats, fortified cereals, or dark green, leafy vegetables.

  If you're not eating at least 5 servings a day of fruits and vegetables, your doctor or dietitian may recommend a daily multi-vitamin. Only take other vitamins or minerals if recommended by a healthcare provider.

If you need further help getting enough calories and protein in your diet, contact a dietitian. Your healthcare providers can help you find one.

Note: If you have diabetes, carefully follow the diet and medications recommendations for your diabetes. If your wounds are not healing, follow up with your dietitian or other healthcare provider.

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