

Wound Care after an Injury

If you've had a traumatic injury, you may have skin wounds — bruises, scrapes, or cuts. (Cuts may be called “lacerations” by your doctor.)

Cuts are treated based on where they are, what caused them, how deep they are, and other factors. Sometimes cuts will heal on their own, without extra treatment. Or, the Trauma Service might have treated them with sutures (stitches), staples, plastic bandages, or Dermabond (a type of surgical “super glue”). This fact sheet explains how to care for your wounds at home.

Caring for scrapes and minor cuts

Here's how to care for scrapes (also called abrasions), minor cuts, and “road rash” at home:

- Clean them daily with mild soap and water. If your doctor prescribed antibiotic ointment, apply a thin layer of ointment once or twice a day. Or, you can use over-the-counter antibiotic ointment if you'd like.
- Check daily for signs of infection — see “Warning Signs” at right.

Caring for large wounds or wounds with stitches or staples

- If you were prescribed antibiotic pills, take them as directed until they are gone.
- Change your dressings (bandages) as directed:
_____ time(s) a day.

If nothing is written on the line above, you will not need to change your dressings or you'll have a follow-up appointment before you need to start changing them.

- Keep the wound dry for 48 hours after it was treated.
- After the first 48 hours, wash the wound as needed with mild soap and water. Then put a very thin layer of antibiotic ointment over the stitches or staples, if your healthcare provider directs you to.

- Do not soak the wound until it's fully healed. This includes baths, long showers, saunas, and hot tubs.

Warning signs — when to get help

Go to the emergency department or call the Trauma Service if you notice signs of infection, such as:

- Pus that drains from the wound — pus is white, green, or yellow and often smelly. (A small amount of clear drainage is normal.)
- Red streaks or areas of tenderness that are very hot and tender to the touch around the wound.

Removing stitches or staples

See your discharge instructions for details on when to have your stitches or staples removed. If stitches or staples are left in too long, they can cause scars and infections.

Stitches may be removed by your regular doctor or at the Trauma Service clinic. Generally, stitches are removed in 5 days if they're on the face, in 10 days if they're on the chest or belly, and in 10 to 14 days if they're on an arm or leg.

Reducing scars

Almost all cuts result in some type of scar. How much you scar often depends on your genetic makeup. Factors such as sun, infection, and the type of cut can also affect scarring. To help reduce scars:

- Keep the wound out of the sun while it heals (this can take 3 months to a year). After it heals, use high SPF sunblock on the wound for a full year.
- Keep the wound free of infection by applying a thin layer of antibiotic ointment daily for 3 to 6 months.
- Keep the wound from getting too hot or too cold.