Negative Pressure Wound Therapy

What is it?

Negative pressure wound therapy (NPWT) is a method of drawing out fluid and infection from a wound to help it heal. A special dressing (bandage) is sealed over the wound and a gentle vacuum pump is attached.

Why do I need it?

Your doctor may recommend NPWT if you have a burn, pressure ulcer, diabetic ulcer, chronic (long-lasting) wound, or injury. This therapy can help your wound heal faster and with fewer infections.

NPWT is a good choice for some patients, but not all. Your doctor will decide if you are a good candidate for this therapy based on your type of wound and your medical situation.

How does it work?

This therapy involves a special dressing (bandage), tubing, a negative pressure device, and canister to collect fluids.

- Your healthcare providers will fit layers of foam dressing to the shape of the wound. The dressing will then be sealed with a film.
- The film has an opening where a tube is attached. The tube leads to a vacuum pump and canister where fluids are collected. The vacuum pump can be set so that it is ongoing, or so it starts and stops intermittently.
- The vacuum pump pulls fluid and infection from the wound. This helps pull the edges of the wound together. It also helps the wound heal by promoting the growth of new tissue.
- When needed, antibiotics and saline can be pushed into the wound.

Using the NPWT device

- **How long will it take to heal my wound?** How long it takes your wound to heal depends on a number of factors. These can include your general health, the size and location of the wound, and your nutritional status. Ask your doctor what you should expect.
- **Can I shower while the device is on?** Yes. You can disconnect the device to take a shower. The device should not be off for more than 2 hours per day, however.
- **Can I take a bath?** No. Bath water can infect a wound. Also, the dressing on the wound can become loose if it’s held under water.
- **What are the noises the device makes?** Because the device has moving parts, it makes a small amount of noise. The noise may become louder or an alarm may sound if there is a leak or a poor seal.
How is the dressing changed?

Having your dressing changed regularly is very important to your healing.

- **How often?** In most cases, the dressing should be changed 2 to 3 times a week. If the wound is infected, the dressing may need to be changed more often.

- **Who changes it?** In most cases, the dressing will be changed by a nurse from your doctor’s office or a home health service. This person will be specially trained to change this type of dressing. In some cases, a caregiver, family member, or friend may be trained to change the dressing.

- **What care needs to be taken?** The person changing your dressing needs to do these things:
  - Wash hands before and after each dressing change.
  - Always wear protective gloves.
  - If they have an open cut or skin condition, wait until it has healed before changing your dressing. In this case, another person should change your dressing.

- **Does it hurt?** Changing this type of dressing is similar to changing any other type of dressing. It may hurt a little, depending on the type of wound. Ask your healthcare providers for help with pain relief.

How can I prevent problems?

Your doctor will only recommend this therapy if he or she believes it is safe for you. Complications can happen, however. These are things you can do to help prevent complications:

- **Prevent infection.** Be sure that anyone changing your dressing cleans their hands and is wearing rubber gloves.

- **Prevent bleeding.** Ask your healthcare provider whether you need to stop taking aspirin or other medications that affect bleeding or blood clotting. Ask about the effect of stopping these medications.

- **Get more help if you need it.** If you don’t feel like you can or want to manage your NPWT device at home, let your healthcare providers know. They may be able to recommend a caregiver to help.

What if the alarm goes off?

The pump may sound an alarm if there’s a leak in the seal of your dressing. Here’s what to do:

- **If you have a home health nurse,** call the nurse to come and repair or replace the dressing.

- **If you have your dressings changed in the clinic,** call the clinic and tell them you need to go in and have your dressing repaired or replaced.

- **If you cannot see a healthcare provider right away,** try to locate the leak and seal it with another layer of the clear film.

- **Do not keep the NPWT dressing on without suction for more than 2 hours,** as this can cause infection. If you cannot get your dressing repaired or replaced within 2 hours, remove the entire dressing and place a gauze dressing over the wound.

When should I call for help?

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have:

- Fever of 102°F or higher
- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Confusion
- Nausea or vomiting
- Dizziness, or feeling faint when you stand up
- Warmth or redness that spreads around the wound
- Ongoing itchiness or rash
- Bleeding around the wound

If you have any of the problems listed above, or if you have concerns about your device, call:

Person:  
Phone:  

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