Wounds - how to care for them
A skin wound that fails to heal, heals slowly or heals but tends to recur is known as a chronic wound. The treatment recommended by your doctor depends on your age, health and nature of your wound. Contrary to popular belief, chronic wounds are more likely to heal if they are treated with moist rather than dry dressings.

A skin wound that doesn't heal, heals slowly or heals but tends to recur is known as a chronic wound. Some of the many causes of chronic (ongoing) skin wounds can include trauma, burns, skin cancers, infection or underlying medical conditions such as diabetes. Wounds that take a long time to heal need special care.

Causes of chronic wounds

Some of the many causes of a chronic skin wound can include:

- Being immobile (pressure injuries or bed sores), where persistent localised pressure restricts blood flow
- Significant trauma injury to the skin
- Surgery – incisions (cuts made during operations) may become infected and slow to heal
- Deep burns
- Underlying medical conditions such as diabetes or some types of vascular disease
- Specific types of infection such as the Bairnsdale or Buruli ulcers (Mycobacterium ulcerans)
- Trophic ulcers, where a lack of sensation allows everyday trauma to lead to an ulcer – such as in diabetic neuropathy and leprosy.

The healing process

The healing process of a skin wound follows a predictable pattern. A wound may fail to heal if one or more of the healing stages are interrupted. The normal wound healing stages include:

- **Inflammatory stage** – blood vessels at the site constrict (tighten) to prevent blood loss and platelets (special clotting cells) gather to build a clot. Once the clot is completed, blood vessels expand to allow maximum blood flow to the wound. This is why a healing wound at first feels warm and looks red. White blood cells flood the area to destroy microbes and other foreign bodies. Skin cells multiply and grow across the wound.
- **Fibroplastic stage** – collagen, the protein fibre that gives skin its strength, starts to grow within the wound. The growth of collagen encourages the edges of the wound to shrink together and close. Small blood vessels (capillaries) form at the site to service the new skin with blood.
- **Maturation stage** – the body constantly adds more collagen and refines the wounded area. This may take months or even years. This is why scars tend to fade with time and why we must take care of wounds for some time after they have healed.

Barriers to wound healing

Factors that can slow the wound healing process include:

- Dead skin (necrosis) – dead skin and foreign materials interfere with the healing process.
- Infection – an open wound may develop a bacterial infection. The body fights the infection rather than healing the wound.
- Haemorrhage – persistent bleeding will keep the wound margins apart.
- Mechanical damage – for example, a person who is immobile is at risk of bedsores because of constant pressure and friction.
- Diet – poor food choices may deprive the body of the nutrients it needs to heal the wound, such as vitamin C, zinc and protein.
- Medical conditions – such as diabetes, anaemia and some vascular diseases that restrict blood flow to the area, or any disorder that hinders the immune system.
- Age – wounds tend to take longer to heal in elderly people.
- Medicines – certain drugs or treatments used in the management of some medical conditions may interfere with the body's healing process.
- Smoking – cigarette smoking impairs healing and increases the risk of complications.
- Varicose veins – restricted blood flow and swelling can lead to skin break down and persistent ulceration.
- Dryness – wounds (such as leg ulcers) that are exposed to the air are less likely to heal. The various cells involved in healing, such as skin cells and immune cells, need a moist environment.

Diagnosis methods

The cause of the chronic wound must be identified so that the underlying factors can be controlled. For example, if a leg or foot ulcer is caused by diabetes, your doctor will review the control of your blood sugar levels and may recommend that you see a podiatrist to prevent recurring ulcers in future. In the case of an ulcer due to varicose veins, surgical treatment of the veins may be required. Diagnosis methods of a chronic wound may include:

- Physical examination including inspection of the wound and assessment of the local nerve and blood supply
- Medical history including information about chronic medical conditions, recent surgery and drugs that you routinely take or have recently taken
- Blood and urine tests
Biopsy of the wound
Culture of the wound to look for any (pathogenic) disease-causing micro-organisms.

Treatment options
The treatment recommended by your doctor depends on your age, health and the nature of your wound. General medical care may include:

- Cleaning to remove dirt and debris from a fresh wound. This is done very gently and often in the shower.
- Vaccinating for tetanus may be recommended in some cases of traumatic injury.
- Exploring a deep wound surgically may be necessary. Local anaesthetic will be given before the examination.
- Removing dead skin surgically. Local anaesthetic will be given.
- Closing large wounds with stitches or staples.
- Dressing the wound. The dressing chosen by your doctor depends on the type and severity of the wound. In most cases of chronic wounds, the doctor will recommend a moist dressing.
- Relieving pain with medications. Pain can cause the blood vessels to constrict, which slows healing. If your wound is causing discomfort, tell your doctor. The doctor may suggest that you take over-the-counter drugs such as paracetamol or may prescribe stronger pain-killing medication.
- Treating signs of infection including pain, pus and fever. The doctor will prescribe antibiotics and antimicrobial dressings if necessary. Take as directed.
- Reviewing your other medications. Some medications, such as anti-inflammatory drugs and steroids, interfere with the body's healing process. Tell your doctor about all medications you take (including natural medicines) or have recently taken. The doctor may change the dose or prescribe other medicines until your wound has healed.
- Using aids such as support stockings. Use these aids as directed by your doctor.
- Treating other medical conditions, such as anaemia, that may prevent your wound healing.
- Prescribing specific antibiotics for wounds caused by Bairnsdale or Buruli ulcers. Skin grafts may also be needed.
- Recommending surgery or radiation treatment to remove rodent ulcers (a non-invasive skin cancer).
- Improving the blood supply with vascular surgery, if diabetes or other conditions related to poor blood supply prevent wound healing.

Self-care suggestions
Be guided by your doctor, but self-care suggestions for slow-healing wounds include:

- Do not take drugs that interfere with the body's natural healing process if possible. For example, anti-inflammatory drugs (such as over-the-counter aspirin) will hamper the action of immune system cells. Ask your doctor for a list of medicines to avoid in the short term.
- Make sure to eat properly. Your body needs good food to fuel the healing process.
- Include foods rich in vitamin C in your diet. The body needs vitamin C to make collagen. Fresh fruits and vegetables eaten daily will also supply your body with other nutrients essential to wound healing such as vitamin A, copper and zinc. It may help to supplement your diet with extra vitamin C.
- Keep your wound dressed. Wounds heal faster if they are kept warm. Try to be quick when changing dressings. Exposing a wound to the open air can drop its temperature and may slow healing for a few hours.
- Don't use antiseptic creams, washes or sprays on a chronic wound. These preparations are poisonous to the cells involved in wound repair.
- Have regular exercise because it increases blood flow, improves general health and speeds wound healing. Ask your doctor for suggestions on appropriate exercise.
- Manage any chronic medical conditions such as diabetes.
- Do not smoke.

See your doctor
Check your wound regularly. See your doctor immediately if you have any symptoms including:

- Bleeding
- Increasing pain
- Pus or discharge from the wound
- Fever.

Always see your doctor if you have any concerns about your wound.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- Hospital staff
- Domiciliary care staff
- Specialist wound clinics
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital.

References


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The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab.

**Skin basics**
- Birthmarks
  In most cases, we do not know what causes birthmarks. Most are harmless, happen by chance and are not caused by anything the mother did wrong in pregnancy...
- Blushing and flushing
  Severe blushing can make it difficult for the person to feel comfortable in social or professional situations...
- Skin explained
  The skin is a good indicator of health - if someone is sick, it often shows in their skin...
- Sweat
  Sweat's main function is to control body temperature...
- Wrinkles
  Sun exposure, smoking and ageing are the main causes of wrinkles...

**Skin cancer**
- Melanoma
  If untreated, melanomas can spread to other parts of the body and may be fatal...
- Skin cancer
  Check all of your skin, not just sun-exposed areas. If you notice anything unusual, including any change in shape, colour or size of a spot, or the development of a spot, visit your doctor as soon as...
- Skin cancer - children
  Encourage your child to be SunSmart ? whatever their age...
- Skin cancer - protecting outdoor workers
  People who work outdoors are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer...
- Skin cancer - risk factors
  The major cause of skin cancer is over exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun or other sources, such as solariums...
- Skin cancer - tanning
  A suntan is a sign of skin damage ? there is no such thing as a 'safe' tan...

**Skin health**
- Healthy ageing - the skin
  Many age-related skin changes can be reduced with healthy lifestyle choices and good skin care...
- Stretch marks
  Over time, stretch marks lose their bright colouring and become silvery, shimmering lines...
- Sunburn
  Even mild sunburn can cause permanent skin damage and may increase your risk of skin cancer...
- Sun protection in the snow
  Winter activities such as snow skiing or snowboarding pose a high risk of sunburn...

**Skin conditions**

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• **Acne**
  Acne is common and can make people of all ages feel embarrassed, but treatments can help if acne is causing distress...

• **Bowen's disease**
  Bowen's disease produces persistent red scaly patches on the skin that are neither sore nor itchy...

• **Eczema (atopic dermatitis)**
  Eczema can vary in severity, and symptoms may flare up or subside from day to day...

• **Erythema nodosum**
  Erythema nodosum appears as red tender lumps, most commonly on the shins...

• **Leprosy (Hansen’s disease)**
  Once a person with leprosy begins treatment they quickly become non-infectious...

• **McCune-Albright syndrome**
  The severity of symptoms or how a child with McCune-Albright syndrome will be affected throughout life is difficult to predict...

• **Psoriasis**
  There is no cure for psoriasis, but it can be well controlled with treatment...

• **Raynaud's phenomenon**
  Raynaud's phenomenon can be a sign of a more serious underlying condition, so see your doctor if you experience it...

• **Rosacea**
  In men, severe rosacea can cause the nose to become reddened and enlarged (rhinophyma)...

• **Scleroderma**
  The most common symptom of scleroderma is a thickening and hardening of the skin, particularly of the hands and face...

• **Tinea**
  Tinea is contagious and can be spread by skin-to-skin contact or indirectly through towels, clothes or floors...

### Skin irritations

- **Bedbugs**
  Bedbugs have highly developed mouth parts that can pierce skin...

- **Bites and stings – first aid**
  If you are bitten or stung by an insect or animal, apply first aid and seek medical treatment as soon as possible...

- **Body lice**
  Body lice can spread from one person to another when the environmental conditions are crowded and unhygienic...

- **Cradle cap**
  Cradle cap is not contagious and it is not caused by poor hygiene or bad parenting...

- **Dandruff and itching scalp**
  Itching scalp can be caused by a number of conditions, including dandruff, seborrhoeic dermatitis and psoriasis...

- **Fleas**
  Fleas are parasites that feed off the blood of humans and animals, and can spread infection...

- **Hives**
  Hives (urticaria) is a reaction to the release of histamine into the skin...

- **Nappy rash**
  Most babies get nappy rash at some stage, no matter how well they are cared for...

- **Scabies**
  If you have scabies, your sexual partners and all members of your household will also need to be treated...
Burns, sores and infections

- Bites and stings – first aid
  If you are bitten or stung by an insect or animal, apply first aid and seek medical treatment as soon as possible.

- Blisters
  A blister is one of the body's responses to injury or friction.

- Boils
  Some areas of the body are more susceptible to boils, including the face, throat, armpits, groin and buttocks.

- Burns and scalds
  Immediate first aid for all burns is to hold the burn under cool running water for at least 20 minutes.

- Burns and scalds - children
  Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom.

- Buruli ulcer
  Since the ulcer gets bigger with time, early diagnosis and prompt treatment of Buruli disease can keep skin loss to a minimum.

- Cellulitis
  Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin that occurs most commonly on the lower legs and in areas where the skin is damaged or inflamed.

- Chilblains
  The symptoms of chilblains are made worse with sudden temperature changes.

- Cold sores
  Cold sores are blisters around the mouth and nose, caused by the herpes simplex virus.

- Cysts
  Cysts may be as small as a blister or large enough to hold litres of fluid.

- Frostbite
  Exhaustion, hunger and dehydration further lower the body's defences against frostbite.

- Impetigo - school sores
  Impetigo, or school sores, is a highly contagious skin infection that commonly affects school-aged children.

- Leg ulcers
  Age, varicose veins, smoking and arterial disease increase the risk of leg ulcers.

- Molluscum contagiosum
  Molluscum contagiosum can be mistaken for genital warts or pimples, check with your doctor for an accurate diagnosis.

- Pityriasis rosea
  Generally, pityriasis rosea is a one-off event - once it has gone, the rash doesn't reappear.

- Pressure sores
  Pressure sores can be difficult to treat and may lead to serious complications.

- Shingles
  Shingles is caused by the same virus responsible for chickenpox.

- Skin cuts and abrasions
  The body begins repairing a wound immediately and the process may continue for days, weeks, months or even years.

- Tinea
  Tinea is contagious and can be spread by skin-to-skin contact or indirectly through towels, clothes or floors.

- Warts
  Warts can be stubborn, so you may need to use more than one type of treatment.
Skin changes

- Cosmetic surgery
  Cosmetic surgery carries risks and, in some cases, the results are not what you may anticipate...
- Home tattooing
  Home tattooing, or getting tattoos overseas, puts you at risk of serious complications that can be debilitating and life-long...
- Piercings
  If you want to have your body pierced, choose an experienced, registered practitioner to reduce the risks of infection and scarring...
- Tattoos
  If you want to get a tattoo, choose an experienced, registered practitioner to reduce the risks of infection and scarring...

Related Information

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Home

Related information on other websites

- Pan Pacific Pressure Injury Guidelines.
- World Wide Wounds.

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This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: La Trobe University - World of Wounds

Last updated: August 2014

Page content currently being reviewed.

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