

This leaflet is written for patients by patients and is based on experience and medical information.

Is my surgical wound healing normally? Healthy wound healing vs. infection

How can wounds get infected?

Wounds heal in several stages. They heal best when they are clean and free from germs.

Germs live harmlessly on our skin and the environment around us. Normally they live on our skin without causing any problems, but some can cause infections.

The skin acts as a barrier. If it is broken, germs may spread to the tissues underneath and this is how an infection can start. Open wounds are more likely to develop infections than wounds closed with stitches, staples or glue. Infections are more likely to develop after surgery on parts of the body that have lots of germs, such as the bowel.

Normal wound healing

Warmth, redness in white skin tones or discolouration in darker skin tones, some itching, and clear fluid, are normal when the wound first starts healing but should not continue past five days or get more severe.

Signs of an infected wound:

Signs of an infected wound are:

- More redness or a colour change around the wound edges.
- The wound feeling warmer or hotter.
- Swelling.
- Fluid leaking from the wound (often called pus) (this may be a different colour – yellow, green, cloudy or more smelly than usual).
- Increased pain which is not improving.
- Feeling unwell.
- Having a high temperature.



How do I prevent my surgical wound becoming infected?

- Keeping your wound area clean and free from germs will help prevent your wound from becoming infected.
- Whether you can shower or not depends on the dressing used on your wound and the clinical advice you have been given.
- If you have been told not to remove the dressing: check if you can shower with the dressing intact, if not you may be able to shower around a wound if you keep it dry or use a limb protector to cover the dressing.
- If you are advised to do so, you can change the dressing:
 - Always wash your hands with soap and water before touching the wound.
 - Remove the old dressing before showering, then wash the wound with non-perfumed soap, dry the wound with a clean cloth or towel and apply a clean dressing afterwards. Avoid rubbing the wound or removing any scabbing.

You are at higher risk of a wound infection if:

- You have diabetes
- You have poor circulation
- You have a poor diet or nutrition
- You smoke
- You take steroids or immune-suppressant therapies
- You have been in hospital for a long time before your operation
- You have poor oxygen circulation in the blood

I think my wound is infected, what do I do?

- Contact your healthcare professional – e.g. a GP, nurse, podiatrist
- If you have severe symptoms, such as sepsis (see next page for more information), dial 999 immediately

Treatment of infected wounds

- Treatment will depend on the severity of the infection. Your healthcare professional will advise you on the correct treatment.
- If there are signs of infection, a wound swab may be taken to see which germs are affecting your wound.
- You may be prescribed antibiotics to treat the infection and stop it spreading. Not all wounds need antibiotics. If you are prescribed antibiotics, you must complete the full course even if you are feeling better.
- It may help if you are able to elevate the affected limb to reduce swelling, for instance - place your arm on some cushions. Elevate your legs on a stool whenever you are sitting down.

Sepsis

! A Sepsis infection can be life-threatening - It is important to be aware and act quickly!

Sepsis is when the immune system overreacts to an infection and starts to damage your body's own tissues and organs.

Call 999 or go to Accident & Emergency if experiencing the following:

- Confusion, slurred speech, or are not making sense
- A rash that does not fade when a glass is rolled over it
- Your skin, lips or tongue are blue, grey, pale or blotchy. On darker skin tones, this may be easier to see on the lips, tongue or gums, under the nails or around the eyes.
- Difficulty breathing, breathing very fast, or breathlessness

Guide for taking Digital Wound Images

NHS Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cuts-and-grazes/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sepsis/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/staphylococcal-infections/>

For more information, scan this QR code or visit
[nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/
nwcsp-publications-and-resources](https://nationalwoundcarestrategy.net/nwcsp-publications-and-resources)



Citylabs 1.0, Nelson Street, Manchester M13 9NQ
nationalwoundcarestrategy.net



A programme commissioned by NHS England.

© National Wound Care Strategy Programme (NWCSP) 2024
Copies may be made for non-commercial purposes.
Any other copying requires the permission of the publishers.