

Scars and Healing

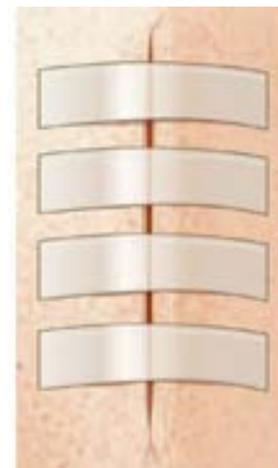
How to care for your incision

This handout explains incision scars and how to help them heal.

What is scarring?

Scarring occurs as skin heals after being damaged. It is a complex process with different phases.

Many things affect the scarring process. We cannot predict exactly how scarring will occur for a certain person, or even for 2 different scars on the same person. And, while we can do some things to help the scarring process, we cannot guarantee that you will have a “good” scar.



Your incisions may be covered with pieces of white tape called Steri-Strips (see “Tape” on page 2).

Scarring Phases

Here are the phases of the scarring process:

- **Inflammatory phase:** The wound is red or pink as the body tries to clean and seal the incision. This can last for days or weeks, depending on the injury.
- **Rebuilding phase:** The wounded skin returns to about 85% of its normal strength. This phase can take weeks or months.
- **Maturation phase:** The last of the inflammation and redness slowly go away. This phase can take months to years. A wound that heals well will be pale, narrow, and flat – just a faded reminder of what the scar looked like at first.

Sealing

- Most incisions seal (close) in 24 to 48 hours. Once they are sealed, it is OK to rinse them or take a shower.
- If small, shallow wounds are not sealed after 2 days, you may want to use an antibiotic ointment 2 to 3 times a day to help speed the sealing process. Bacitracin, Neosporin, or any antibiotic ointment will work.

You can buy these “over the counter” (without a prescription). Ask your doctor if you can use an antibiotic ointment on your wound, if needed.

Water and Showering

- Do **not** soak your incision. Water can soften and reopen it.
- Do not take a bath, soak in a hot tub, or go swimming until your wound is sealed firmly and your surgeon tells you it is OK.
- **Wait for 48 hours** after your surgery before taking a shower. When you shower:
 - Use gentle soap and lukewarm water to gently clean your incision. Do **not** scrub.
 - After showering, do **not** rub your incisions. Gently pat it dry with a clean towel. Or, use a hairdryer on the warm setting to dry the area.
 - Shower like this every day to keep the area clean while it heals.

Tape

- Incisions are often covered with small strips of white tape called Steri-Strips. These tapes help protect and seal the skin.
- Steri-Strips will fall off in about a week. If they become loose, you can trim off any loose parts.

Sun

- Sunlight can either darken or lighten a scar. This color change usually goes away, but it can last up to 2 years.
- To help keep your scar from changing color, protect it from the sun:
 - Use sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.
 - Cover your scar with a bandage that lets air in. Do **not** use plastic or other bandages that let moisture build up. Moisture can cause an incision to open up.
 - For head and neck wounds, wear a hat or scarf or other clothing over the wound while it heals.

Nutrition

To heal, your body needs protein, vitamins, and minerals. These nutrients are especially important to the healing process:

- Vitamin C
- Zinc
- Iron

Take a daily supplement of these nutrients to help your wound heal. This should be in addition to your daily multivitamin.

Massage

Massage uses both pressure and ointments for healing. Studies show that firm pressure may be the most important healing factor in scarring. But, some ointments that can be used to speed healing. These include:

- Aquaphor
- Eucerin
- Bacitracin
- Cocoa butter
- Aloe
- Silicone gel

We suggest starting massage treatment about 3 weeks after your surgery, when your incision is getting stronger and more stable. Use ointment and massage the area 3 times a day for 10 minutes each time. Do this for several months.

Silicone

Studies show that using silicone, in gel or sheet form, helps scar tissue form. It is used on closed, healed incisions to manage existing *hypertrophic scars* and *keloids* (see page 4), or to keep these from occurring after an incision has healed. For best results, use silicone 12 to 24 hours a day for 2 to 4 months.

Silicone Adhesive Sheets for Body Scars

Silicone adhesive sheets are soft, self-adhesive dressings that are used for body scars. They can be cut to fit your scar. Tapes like the Hypafix brand are best to keep these sheets in place. You may also use paper tape.

Remove the silicone when you shower. Clean the silicone sheet with soap and water and then reuse it. Replace it with a new one after 2 to 3 weeks, or when it starts to fall apart.

You can buy these dressings online. Search for “silicone sheets.” Sheets that are 100% silicone work best. Popular brands are Cica-Care, NewGel, and Retouch.

Check with your health insurance company to see if they cover the costs of these silicone sheets. The diagnosis codes are:

- 701.4 for keloid scar
- 709.2 for scar condition

Cimeosil Topical Scar Gel for Facial Scars

For scars on your face, use Cimeosil topical scar gel. You can buy it online at www.cimeosil.com.

The 14 gm tube can last up to 90 days when used every day on a scar that is 3 to 4 inches long. You can put the gel under makeup and over sunscreen. Use the gel until your scar turns pale and no longer changes color when you apply and remove pressure.

Hypertrophic Scars and Keloids

People with brown or olive skin are more likely to have:

- Scars that are raised (*hypertrophic*)
- Scars that keep growing outside the original scar area (*keloids*)

Follow the guidelines for scar care in this handout to lessen these conditions.

If hypertrophic or keloid scars do occur, it is best to treat them when they first appear. Later treatment may also work. Please ask your primary care provider about this.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217, and press 8.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the resident on call for your surgeon to be paged.