

## TREATMENT OF SKIN TEARS



To family caregivers all wounds may look alike—messy, bloody, and scary. There are important differences, however, and knowing what kind of wound you are dealing with is the first step in proper treatment and prevention.

This video describes how to care for skin tears and offers some suggestions for prevention. The simplest definition of a skin tear is a wound that separates the top layer of the skin from one or more of the underlying layers. This can happen in a lot of ways, for example, when the person bumps into furniture or scrapes an arm or leg trying to get up after a fall. Sometimes skin tears happen during a transfer from bed to chair or repositioning in bed. There are also other causes, such as medication side effects.

Older adults are particularly vulnerable to skin tears because aging makes the skin thinner, less elastic, and more fragile. Most often skin tears occur on a person's arms, or legs, but they can occur anywhere on the body.

Because skin tears are so common and don't require stitches, they may be considered minor injuries. However, they can be slow to heal and become painful and costly. Every skin tear should be treated as a potentially serious injury.

### Supplies for Skin Tear Treatment

To treat a skin tear, or to be prepared in case one happens, these are supplies to have on hand:

- > Mild soap and water to cleanse the wound
- > Petroleum jelly or other recommended ointment to keep the wound moist
- > Gauze pads or silicone dressings to cover the wound
- > — Silicone dressing is easier to remove because it doesn't stick to the skin
- > Tape or gauze wrap to keep the dressing in place
- > Disposable gloves
- > Towel to support the person's body part and keep the surface clean
- > Zip-lock plastic bags for disposal of treatment materials
  - Don't put used bandages or gloves directly in garbage

### Steps in Treating a Skin Tear

1. Wash your hands thoroughly
2. Put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves
3. If there is an old dressing, remove it carefully
4. Place it in the resealable plastic bag for disposal
5. Remove your gloves and place in the disposal bag
6. Wash your hands again
7. Put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves
8. Cleanse the wound and pat dry
9. Wash your hands again
10. Put on a fresh pair of disposable gloves
11. Put petroleum jelly on the wound to keep it moist
12. Apply a clean 4X4 inch gauze pad or silicone dressing
13. Use tape or gauze wrap to keep the dressing in place
14. Remove your gloves and place in the disposal bag
15. Make sure all materials are in the disposal bag
16. Wash hands again

For the type of wound shown in the video, changing the dressing every 3 to 5 days should be sufficient. If the wound is larger or deeper, or there is blood or a discharge oozing from the dressing, more frequent changes may be required. Keep your health care provider up to date on the wound's healing.

## Signs of Infection

When changing the dressing, make sure you look for any signs of infection. These include:

- > Redness
- > Swelling
- > Change in drainage
- > Fever
- > Chills
- > Increased pain

If any of these occur, and especially if you observe more than one, contact your health care professional immediately.

## Preventing Skin Tears

Here are some tips to prevent skin tears from happening:

- > The person should wear long pants and long sleeves
- > Drinking lots of water is important to keep the skin from drying out
- > The person's diet should include nutritious foods such as
  - Lean turkey or chicken
  - Vegetables
  - Whole grains
- > Consult with your health care professional if skin tears are very frequent; they may be related to medications or other medical conditions

## Other Resources

- > The American Journal of Nursing has a free online article, "[Preventing, Assessing, and Managing Skin Tears: A Clinical Review.](#)" While intended for nurses, this article has basic instructions that may be helpful for a family caregiver caring for a person with a complex wound. Trigger warning: Some of the photos are more graphic than the example of a skin tear shown in the video.
- > "[Skin Tears Made Easy](#)" is another resource intended for clinicians that offers good advice for family caregivers. There is a section on creating a safe environment at home, such as ensuring adequate lighting and positioning furniture to avoid unnecessary knocks or bumps. Although prepared in the UK, the advice is universal.
- > For veterans and caregivers of veterans, go to [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov) or call 1-855-260-3274 for more information about resources and support.
- > Another Home Alone Alliance video, "Preparing the Home For Safe Mobility," offers suggestions to prevent falls, which also may prevent skin tears. [videos.aarp.org/detail/video/5327211325001/family-caregiving-series:-what-to-do-when-someone-falls](https://www.aarp.org/detail/video/5327211325001/family-caregiving-series:-what-to-do-when-someone-falls)

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