



Incision Care and Dressing Change

*University of
Pittsburgh
Medical Center
Information
for Patients*

What is an incision?

An incision is a surgical “cut” through which an operation is performed. Some incisions are small and others are very long. An incision may be closed with sutures (stitches) on the outside of the body. Other incisions are closed with surgical staples, which provide added strength to the incision. Another type of incision may be sutured on the inside. In this case, small, sticky strips (called Steri-Strips) may be placed on your skin across the incision line. These strips will fall off when the incision has healed.

How do I care for my incision?

An incision should be kept clean and dry at all times to help promote healing. If your doctor permits a tub bath or shower, you can gently wash over the incision. Make sure you rinse all the soap off, then pat dry. If you are not permitted to get the incision wet, follow your doctor’s specific orders for cleaning the incision. **Never** apply any type of cream or lotion to the incision, unless your doctor tells you to. You should also avoid wearing tight clothing that rubs against the incision while it is healing.

Inspect your incision in the morning and at night to check the progress of healing. Contact your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- increased redness around the incision area
- increased pain at the incision site
- swelling at your incision
- drainage coming from or around the incision that looks or smells like pus
- bleeding from the incision
- temperature above 100 F for more than four hours

What if I have a dressing over my incision?

A dressing is a clean cover over an incision. A gauze dressing is secured to the skin with surgical tape. Some dressings are clear and adhere to the skin without tape. The purpose of a dressing is to keep the incision (or wound) clean, dry, and protected during the healing process. A dressing also absorbs any drainage that may come from the incision or wound. Sometimes dressings are used after a medication is applied to the incision or wound; the dressing keeps the medication in contact with the incision or wound.

How should I change the dressing?

You will receive specific instructions on your dressing change, depending on the purpose of the dressing. Keep in mind that you should follow the same general guidelines for any dressing change:

1. Make sure you have all supplies handy before beginning the dressing change.
2. You should have a clean work surface on which to place all equipment you will need. You may want to use a clean towel to cover your work surface.
3. Always wash your hands with soap and water before touching the dressing.
4. After removing the dressing, wrap it in a plastic bag or paper towel before throwing it in the trash.
5. Wash your hands with soap and water *again* after removing the old dressing. This prevents any germs on the old dressing from getting onto the clean dressing.
6. Always inspect the wound or incision for any changes or signs and symptoms of infection.
7. Apply the clean dressing as directed by your doctor or nurse. (Ask your doctor or nurse if you should be wearing gloves during this procedure.)
8. Wash your hands with soap and water when you are finished.



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