



HEAD & NECK CANCER
AUSTRALIA
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WOUND CARE AFTER SURGERY



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WOUND CARE AFTER SURGERY

This information includes practical tips and ways to look after your wound after head and neck cancer surgery. It may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions to ask that you may want to ask your cancer care team; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your [cancer care team](#).

LOOKING AFTER YOUR WOUND FOLLOWING SURGERY

Your surgeon may use a variety of methods to close wounds after head and neck cancer surgery. Some of the common ones are:

- You may have stitches under the skin that dissolve over time (don't need to be removed)
- Stitches on the outside of the skin that do not dissolve. They are usually removed one to two weeks after your surgery
- Staples on the outside of the skin. They are usually removed one to two weeks after your surgery. The sutures / staples may be removed all at once or by removing alternate ones, and the remaining on the following day.

Sutures / staples may be removed by:

- Your surgeon
- A nurse
- Your GP

Some of the common dressings used to cover the wound include:

- Steri-strips, which are sticky plasters applied directly to the incision. They are not waterproof but are usually left in place for one or two weeks.
- Waterproof sticky dressings. They can be left in place until review as long as there is no evidence of discharge under the dressing. They can be used under the shower.
- Antibiotic ointments, these are applied to the wound two or three times per day

- Dry non-adherent (not sticky) dressings, held on with tape or a bandage. These need to be kept dry.

After the dressing has been removed, it is important to keep the wound clean. Whilst some moisture is not harmful, do not swim or soak your wound in a bath or shower until your surgeon says so.

Once your doctor has given you permission to allow the wound to get wet, clean the wound daily. Use very mild soapy water with gentle movements. Ensure you rinse off with warm water and gently pat the wound dry with a clean fresh towel.

You should look at your wound each day to see how it is healing.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INFECTION

The following signs and symptoms may indicate that the wound is infected. Look out for:

- increasing pain, redness and warmth around the wound
- body temperature higher than 38 degrees Celsius
- swelling or a lump forming under the wound
- wound looks like it may be coming apart
- aches and pains, sweats and chills
- discharge of pus from the wound.

If the wound is covered by a dressing it may be difficult to tell if there is a problem until the dressing has been removed. Consider seeing your surgeon, GP or wound care nurse to remove the dressing early if there is:

- pain under the dressing
- redness around the dressing
- fluid accumulating under the dressing

Contact your doctor, if you have any of these symptoms.

MINIMISING THE APPEARANCE OF SCARS

There are a variety of creams, gels and dressings that can be used to help reduce the visibility of the scar after surgery. Ask your surgeon for an option that is best suitable for your particular wound and skin type.

Your surgeon may recommend either of the following options depending on the type of scar:

- For a high risk of a thick (keloid) scar: Your surgeon may recommend a silicone strip dressing. Cut dressing to size, ensure your wound is covered all-day long, even when you are asleep. Clean the wound daily, (as above) and apply a new dressing. This may be required for several months; your surgeon will recommend if the wound needs to be covered for longer.
- For a moderate risk of a thick (keloid) scar: Your surgeon may recommend a silicone gel dressing. Apply a thin layer of gel to the full length of the wound three times per day (after shower/bath) for two months (do not rub in). A moisturiser such as Sorbolene or vitamin E can be gently and lightly massaged into the skin around the wound this may also help to reduce the swelling.
- For a low risk of a thick (keloid) scar: Your surgeon may recommend a moisturiser such as Sorbolene or vitamin E. Apply a thick layer of oil/cream to the full length of the wound three times per day (after shower/bath) for two months. Sorbolene or vitamin E can be massaged gently and lightly into the skin around the wound and may also help to reduce the swelling.

Products that you may want to use to reduce scarring:

- **Dermatix Gel**
- **Bepanthen Scar Treatment**
- **Bio Oil**
- **Vitamin E Cream**
- **Sorbolene Cream**
- **Cica Care Gel Sheet**

These products can be purchased from most pharmacies. This is not an exhaustive list, speak to your surgeon or wound care nurse for advice.

GENERAL TIPS FOR IMPROVING WOUND HEALING AT HOME

- Treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy also impact the healing of your wound. Sutures may need to be left in place longer than usual. There is a higher chance of wound infection and wound separation.
- Clean your wound and make sure you apply a clean dressing regularly.
- Avoid using antiseptic creams, washes or sprays. These preparations may affect how the wound repairs itself.
- If you notice any signs of infection, or swelling speak to your doctor.
- Eating properly is important for wound healing as the body needs essential nutrients to ensure healing of the wound. For example, the body needs vitamin C to make collagen for wound repair. Fresh fruits and vegetables will also supply your body with nutrients essential to wound healing such as vitamin C, vitamin A, copper and zinc.
- Make sure you exercise regularly. Exercise increases blood flow, improves general health and speeds wound healing. Ask your doctor for suggestions on appropriate exercises.
- Avoid smoking, as it may interfere with the healing process.
- Only recommence pre-surgery medications as directed by your doctor; some of these may impact wound healing.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CANCER CARE TEAM

- What are the signs and symptoms of infection?
- Who should I speak to if I suspect my wound is infected?
- Can you refer me to a health professional who would be able to help me with my diet and nutrition?
- Can you refer me to a health professional that would be able to help me with specialised exercises to help my neck and shoulders?

- How long should I continue to do these?
- What type of moisturiser should I use?
- Is it normal to feel a numb or different sensation in my neck and side of my face?

You may want to write specific questions here to ask your doctor or cancer care team

About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

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