

## Looking at a Wound and Stitches (Sutures)

1. Look at a person's stitches (sutures) or wound closures at least daily unless they are covered by a dressing that is not to be removed.
2. Know what to look for. Have the doctor tell you:
  - a. If the wound should be open to air
  - b. If the wound should be covered with a dressing or bandage
  - c. How often to change a bandage
  - d. When the doctor will remove the sutures or closures
  - e. Any special care instructions, such as cleansing.
  - f. Any problems the doctor expects
3. To look at a wound you will need these supplies:
  - a. A pair of powder-free disposable gloves, which you can get at a drug store. If the person has an allergy to latex, use latex free gloves.
  - b. A large bath towel
4. Wash your hands for at least 15 seconds, rinse, and then dry. Or use a hand disinfectant.
5. Put on the pair of disposable, powder-free gloves.
6. Choose a place in the home where the person can easily sit or lie down to expose the wound for you to see. Have a bright light nearby.
7. Have the person open their shirt, blouse or pants to uncover the wound. Have the bath towel ready, so the person can cover a body part he or she does not want you to see.
8. If the wound is open to the air, look at it and the stitches closely each day.
9. In other cases the wound will be covered with a bandage or dressing. If the doctor orders dressing changes, you will remove the dressing to look at the sutures.
10. Do not be afraid to look. You will not harm the person. Have the person look at their wound with you.
11. If the wound is covered with a bandage, it should be:
  - a. Dry, with no stain or drainage from the wound moistening the bandage.
  - b. Intact – taped securely so it is not loose.
12. If the wound is uncovered or if you are changing a bandage:
  - a. Look to see if all of the sutures or closures are in place, or do you see one cut or pulled away from the skin?
  - b. Count the number of sutures or closures you see.
  - c. Are the skin edges between each suture closed or meeting together?  
Normally the wound edges should be clean and closed.
  - d. Look at the skin along the wound, is it pink, reddened, or a normal skin tone?
    - i. Redness is normal, especially the first 24 hours because of blood flow to the skin.

- ii. A wound will remain red for about 2 to 3 days. Gradually redness should disappear, and then the skin turns shades of brown and yellow, like bruising.
  - e. Is there swelling of the skin along the wound edges? Swelling is normal the first 1 to 2 days as a response to skin injury. Over the next few days, swelling should disappear.
  - f. A small amount of redness will remain around each of the sutures until each one is removed. If the skin is swollen and hard along with the redness, let the doctor or nurse know.
13. These are signs a wound is **not healing**:
- a. Presence of Red streaks
  - b. Swelling
  - c. Pus (yellowish, brown or green drainage)
  - d. Offensive odor coming from the wound
  - e. Warm skin in the area of the wound
  - f. Fever [greater than 100.5 degrees] In
14. Ask the person if they notice any changes in the wound or if they feel any discomfort or pain. Some tenderness is normal, and this should clear up over the next several days.
15. If a person tells you the wound is very tender, check for drainage.
- a. Be sure you still have your gloves on.
  - b. Take your index finger of your hand and gently, very gently, press lightly around the edges of the incision.
  - c. Normally there will be some tenderness when you press down, but this lessens over the next several days.
  - d. When you press lightly, look at the wound.
    - i. Does this cause any drainage or discharge to come out of the incision, between the sutures?
    - ii. If so, call the person's surgeon immediately.
    - iii. Remember, **do not press hard or deeply** over the wound.
16. Help the person re-button or put on their clothes. Discard the towel, throw away your gloves in the trash and wash your hands.
17. Each time you look at a wound compare what you see with what you saw the last time. Write down notes in your care diary to describe what the incision and the sutures look like. Over several days the wound should show signs of healing.

## Care of Stitches (Sutures)

1. Follow the doctor's directions for suture care. These guidelines are **not** for wounds closed by butterfly, glue or steri-strips (Talk with the doctor about how to care for these wounds).
2. Wash your hands thoroughly for 15 seconds, rinse, then dry. Or use a hand disinfectant.
3. You will need these supplies:
  - a. Bath towel
  - b. Wash Basin filled with warm water
  - c. Soap – mild hand soap or soap prescribed by your doctor (such as Dial or Hibiclens)
  - d. Wash Cloth (More than one for large wounds)
  - e. Pair of clean powder-free disposable gloves. Note, if the person you provide care for has an allergy to latex, use latex free gloves.
  - f. **An Option is:** Bottle of sterile saline for wound cleansing (available at pharmacy) and sterile Q tips or cotton applicators.
4. Have the person lie or sit comfortably in a bed or a chair. Choose an area well lighted so that you can see the wound. Have the washbasin and supplies close by on a bedside table.
5. Put on the disposable gloves.
6. Uncover the wound so that you can see the stitches (sutures) clearly. Do not pull the bandage off with force as it may pull off tissue and lead to bleeding along the suture line. Now is a good time to look at the wound carefully. See the checklist on **Looking at a Wound with Stitches.**
7. If your gloves become soiled, remove them, wash your hands and apply a new pair.
8. Cleanse the wound.
  - a. Your doctor will likely have you use either plain soap and water or sterile saline, to clean the incision area.
  - b. When using soap and water, moisten the wash cloth in warm water, then apply a small amount of soap, and gently wash off any crusts or dirt that forms around the sutures.
  - c. Always start at the wound site and wash out and away from there. Do not wash from the outer area in toward the wound. This spreads infection into the wound.
  - d. Use a clean portion of the cloth each time you wipe across the wound.
  - e. Do not be afraid to apply gentle pressure to clean off wound crusts.
  - f. **Do Not Soak a Wound** to Remove Crusts.
  - g. If an area is heavily crusted and will not wash off easily, leave the wash cloth in place for a few seconds to loosen the crusts. (A heavily crusted area may

also have a suture under it and too much pressure or pulling of the cloth may loosen sutures and cause the wound to open)

- h. Do Not Use Alcohol, Hydrogen Peroxide, or Mercurochrome to clean the wound because each can damage the wound.
  - i. Rinse off the soap, using a clean portion of the cloth or a new cloth each time you wipe across the wound. (Always start at the wound site and wash out and away from the wound).
  - j. Dry the wound by patting gently with a clean towel over the skin.
9. If the doctor recommends cleansing the wound with normal saline, pour a small amount of the solution into a clean container. Take a sterile Q-tip, dip it into the saline and gently cleanse along the suture line.
  10. Move the Q tip across the sutures in the same direction used with the wash cloth. Dispose of the Q tip and then use a new one for each cleansing stroke. Repeat this process until the wound is thoroughly cleansed.
  11. **Never** use only one Q tip and re-dip it into the saline.
  12. If the person requires a bandage. Apply a new one now. See our lesson on **Applying gauze bandages.**
  13. Throw away the soiled washcloth and towel in a separate laundry bag. Launder these separately from clothing or linen to prevent spreading any infection.
  14. Throw away the Q tips, old bandage, and gloves in a disposable plastic bag such as a plastic grocery bag.
  15. Wash your hands thoroughly.
  16. Write down notes in your care diary, describing the appearance of the stitches, wound and bandage.