

Caring for your child's heart wound at home



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Types of wounds and how long they take to heal

After heart surgery your child will have a wound. There are several types of wound:

- Sternotomy - is in the middle of their chest, down the breast bone.
- Thoracotomy - is usually on their side, under their armpit.
- Drain or catheter sites - usually smaller wounds (0.5-1cm) on the chest or abdomen.

The site of the surgery will have been decided by the type of procedure your child had. We expect all types of wounds for the skin and tissue to heal within 1-2 months of the surgery.

The wound is considered fully healed when the scab has come off the entire length of the wound. The wound edges will heal completely together. There should be no open areas or gaps in the wound.

Handling my child's wound at home

The skin on the wound is very delicate and fragile as the new skin starts the healing process. The skin might be tender or painful to touch.

It is important to be careful of your child's wound when picking them up. Pressure on the wound can cause pain, bruising and can affect the healing, sometimes causing the tissues to come apart and the wound to break down.

- For a thoracotomy, avoid picking them up under their arms as it's more likely your hand will sit across the wound.
- For a sternotomy, be careful on pressing near the wound.
- A good position for picking up and holding babies after cardiac surgery can be in the cradle hold.

The ward team will show you how you can do this during your stay. For more information, the website below has some information on different ways to pick up babies <https://www.nhs.uk/video/Pages/what-is-the-best-way-to-hold-a-newborn-baby.aspx>

It is best not to touch or handle the wound too much to avoid any damage and infection especially until the wound has healed

If you do need to touch the wound, please thoroughly wash your hands before and after any contact with the wound.

Can I wash and bathe my child with their wound?

While there are open areas or a scab on the wound it is important it stays dry.

Getting the wound wet can damage the new skin that is forming and cause the wound to reopen. Once the wound is fully healed and there are no scabs or open areas, then bathing and washing can be started.

Things to avoid:

- Scrubbing or rubbing the wound when cleaning it.
- Soap, shower gel, body lotions, powders or other fragranced products.
- Getting the wound wet until it is completely healed with no open areas or scabs.

We do not advise swimming until after your follow up with the heart doctor.

Skin care

Wounds that are healing can get very itchy and the skin can get dry and flaky. It is important that your child is not allowed to scratch the wound as this will cause damage and increase the risk of infection.

To help prevent scratching you can keep your child's nails short, or for babies/infants use mitts. It's useful to keep your child dressed so they cannot easily get to the wound.

Things to be aware of:

- Scabs should come off in their own time.
- Once the wound is fully healed, massaging a plain, un-perfumed moisturiser or oil, down the scar line in circular motions can help with the itching and improve the scars appearance.
- Over time this helps the layers of the skin knit back together and can help the scar to fade and become less red.
- Using sun-cream is very important. The scar will be extremely sensitive to the sun in the first two years after surgery, so it is recommended to use full sun block on the scar when outside.

What if there are stitches still in?

If your child is being discharged home with stitches in, you should have been told by the ward team when they need to come out. If you get home and notice stitches and don't have a plan for when they are to come out, please contact the cardiac outreach team for advice.

Stitches can be in for between 5-14 days, depending what type they are.

If a stitch becomes visible in the months after surgery, contact the cardiac outreach team for advice.

Observation and changes to the wound

It is important to monitor your child's wounds for any changes. After surgery infection can occur if germs get into the body through the wound site.

Sometimes these germs can cause an infection. Wound infections are a recognised risk of surgery but are uncommon.

Signs to look out for are:

- Increasing redness around the wound and surrounding area.
- Inflammation or swelling around the wound.
- Increasing pain.
- A bad smell from the wound.
- Open areas on or around the wound.
- Pus or discharge from the wound.
- Temperature, vomiting or if your child becomes unwell.

If you see any of these it is important to get your child seen by your GP or local hospital.

Please let the cardiac outreach team know about any changes as this means we can track the progress and provide further advice if needed.

It can be useful if you take photos of your child's wound as this will help show any changes over time.

On-going care

Stitches to be removed on: ____/____/____

By:

Dressing(s) to be removed on: ____/____/____

By:

Plan (if applicable):

Frequently asked questions

What happens if my child's wound gets wet?

If your child's wound gets wet, gently pat it dry with a clean towel. Avoid rubbing it to prevent damaging the wound.

What happens if my child's dressing gets wet, dirty or is falling off?

Please contact your GP or community nurse to get an appointment for them to review the wound and redress it if needed.

How do I tell if the stitches need to be taken out?

Stitches that need to be removed are normally visible on the skin and are blue or black colour in appearance. If you are not sure please contact the cardiac outreach team.

How do I pick up my child without hurting them?

Please see the section on page 4 for how to handle your child's wound.

I can feel a lump along my child's chest wound. Is this ok?

Yes, the internal sutures (stitches) can take several months to dissolve and can be felt through the skin, more commonly at the top or the bottom of the wound. This should not change in size. If you are concerned about this or it changes (becomes painful, gets bigger or has any pus or discharge coming out of the wound), please contact the cardiac outreach team.

I'm concerned about my child's wound, what should I do?

You can send a picture by email to the cardiac outreach team who can provide advice on what to do next from the clinical team. You only need to send a picture of the wound area. Please do not send pictures of faces. Once the team has responded, the photo will be deleted.

Emails will only be reviewed during normal working hours, Monday to Friday. If you are concerned that your child is becoming more unwell please seek advice from your GP, NHS Direct by calling 111, or your local hospital.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's wound, please contact the Cardiac Outreach team on 020 7188 4546 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) or by email:

paediatriccardiologyoutreachnurses@gstt.nhs.uk

Out of hours, please contact 020 7188 8849 and speak to the nurse in charge.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets

Contact us

Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline.

t: 020 7188 3003 10am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

e: letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk



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