

## WHAT'S A SKIN TEAR?

Skin tears are wounds caused by trauma, friction, and/or shear. They range in depth from partial thickness to full thickness, and can have no, partial or complete loss of the skin flap. *The most common causes of skin tears are:*

- Wheelchair injuries (25%);
- Bumping into objects (25%);
- Transfers (18%), and;
- Falls (12%).

Although you can get a skin tear on any part of your body, the most common spots for skin tears are on the hands and arms (80%). Also, although you can get a skin tear at any time of the day, the most common times of skin tear injury are between 6AM and 11AM and 3PM and 9PM.

## AM I AT RISK FOR A SKIN TEAR?

*The following increase your risk for getting a skin tear:*

- Being older than 85;
- Female gender;
- Caucasian race;
- Reduced mobility, ability to self-transfer, and high fall risk;
- Poor nutrition and/or hydration;
- Long term use of steroid medications;
- Dementia, Alzheimer's Disease, or confusion;
- History of bruising easily or of skin tears;
- Altered sensation;
- Stiffness or spastic movements;
- Smoking;

your doctor immediately. If there are no signs of infection, clean the wound and skin around the wound well with lukewarm tap water. Pat the wound/skin dry. If there is a flap of loose skin present, try to flatten it out and cover your wound with it the best you can. Cover the wound with a non-stick dressing or a Band-Aid that closes on all sides. Make an appointment to see your doctor within the next couple of days (the sooner the better), and continue to change the dressing at least every day, and more often if the dressing falls off or leaks through (you want to keep the sore clean and dry).

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

As a person with a skin tear or at risk for a skin tear you should be regularly visiting your doctor.

*At these visits you should be asking:*

- What are my risk factors for getting a skin tear, and what can we do to address them?
- Am I at an ideal body weight, and if not, what can I do to get there?
- Can you help me to stop or reduce smoking/drinking alcohol?
- Are my blood sugars well enough controlled to allow my skin tear to heal (if you have diabetes)?
- Are my other health conditions under control, and if not, how can we better control them?
- Would I benefit from seeing a dietitian, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, or from personal support assistance or nursing services?

For more information on skin tears, nutrition, wound healing, and for community resources, go to:

[swrwoundcareprogram.ca](http://swrwoundcareprogram.ca)



South West Regional Wound Care Program  
c/o Lyndsay Orr, PT, MCISc (Wound Healing)  
South West Local Health Integration Network  
201 Queens Ave, London, ON N6A 1J1  
E-mail: [lyndsay.orr@lhins.on.ca](mailto:lyndsay.orr@lhins.on.ca)



# “MY SKIN TEAR”

Tips on how to prevent  
and care for your or your  
loved one's skin tear





## COMMON QUESTIONS

- Taking many different medications;
- Dependence on others for help with your activities of daily living, i.e. Bathing, dressing, hygiene, toileting, etc.;
- Use of assistive devices, i.e. Walkers, canes, wheelchairs, etc.;
- Use of compression stockings and/or tape/adhesives on the skin;
- Circulation, heart, and breathing problems;
- Visual problems, and;
- Having blood drawn.

### WHY DOES AGING INCREASE MY RISK OF GETTING A SKIN TEAR?

*As we age:*

- The outer layer of our skin replaces itself slower;
- The middle layer of skin becomes 20% thinner, which makes the underlying tissue more prone to injury;
- The fatty tissue disappears, especially on your face, shins, and the back of your hands;
- Blood vessels in the skin become thinner and more prone to injury resulting in purple discoloration of your skin which is more apt to tear, and;
- The skin becomes dry, itchy, and inelastic.

### DO I NEED TETANUS SHOT IF I GET A SKIN TEAR?

If you get a skin tear and have not had tetanus shot in the past ten years, you must visit your doctor or health unit for a tetanus shot, as skin tears are prone to tetanus.

### WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

You are a very important member of your wound care team. *To help close your skin tear and prevent new ones from happening:*

- Practice good skin care;
- Moisturize intact skin daily (twice daily if dry) with a mild non-scented moisturizer;
- Avoid long hot baths, rather choose short warm showers;
- Gently pat skin dry after showers.  
Do not rub the skin aggressively;
- Put on sun screen at least 15 minutes before you go out into the sun, and reapply often if sweating or swimming;
- Don't use tapes/adhesives on your skin;
- Protect any bruises or dark purple areas on your skin from further trauma;
- Keep fingernails and toenails short and filed;
- Wear appropriate clothing, i.e. Avoid tight or restrictive clothing; wear long sleeved shirts, pants, and a hat when in the sun; wear well-fitting shoes with skid proof soles; and protect your arms and legs from injury with long sleeved shirts, pants, long socks, leg warmers;
- Look at your furniture and move any furniture that blocks your way to the bathroom and around your bed; and pad any sharp corners on furniture and assistive devices;
- Make sure there is good lighting in living areas, and use a night light in the bathroom;
- If you are using a hospital bed, pad side rails or use pillows to keep your arm/legs from striking or going through the side rails, or leave side rails down if possible; and, use pillows between bony areas, i.e. Between your knees or ankles when lying in bed;

- Remind those who help you transfer, to use the palms of their hands when touching your arms and legs, not their fingertips, and to use proper turning, positioning, and transferring techniques;
- Keep your dressing clean and dry;
- Change your dressing as instructed by your nurse. If you or a family member, friend, or neighbor is capable of changing the dressing, you will be taught;
- Recognize the signs of wound infection and get help right away. Signs of infection include: redness/heat/swelling, increased drainage, drainage that is foul, green, or pus, increased or new pain, fever (38°C), and red streaks up the foot or leg;
- Stop smoking;
- Eat a well-balanced diet and drink lots of non-caffeinated fluids;
- Take your medications as instructed by your doctor;
- Keep your blood sugars in good control (if you have diabetes);
- Get to and/or maintaining a healthy body weight;
- Get enough sleep/rest;
- Avoid trauma, pressure, and friction to vulnerable areas of your skin;
- Control pain, and;
- Don't use scatter rugs.

### I FOUND A NEW SKIN TEAR!

Don't panic if you find or get a new skin tear. The good thing is that as you are looking your skin every day that you have likely caught the wound quickly. If there is redness, heat, swelling and/or pain around the wound (signs of infection), go to

*[continued on back page]*

