

# Preventing and Managing Skin Injuries

## Minor Trauma (Cuts, Scrapes, and Bruises)

**Wounds Canada has developed a simple guide that can be used by people of all ages to help keep their skin healthy by preventing minor skin injuries. The information in this resource applies to everyone, but is especially important for individuals who are at high risk for skin injuries.**

The skin is the largest organ in your body, covering about 1.6 sq metres and weighing approximately 5.4 kg in the average adult. It is a protective barrier that shields you from heat, light, injury and infection. Skin is always at risk of injury, but it has an amazing ability to heal itself. Some people are at higher risk than others for injury because of their age, health status, activities or other factors.



### Who is most at risk for a skin injury?

Most minor skin injuries are preventable—but of course they do happen. For most people, minor skin injuries don't cause major problems. But in certain individuals, minor skin injuries can happen often and can lead to serious discomfort and even other health problems. So who is at highest risk for minor skin injuries? Below are some common reasons a person may be at an increased risk:

**Activities:** Certain activities—at home, work or play—put a person at higher risk when they involve sharp or hard equipment or tools, fast-moving objects, high rates of contact with others, falls or other dangers like exposure to fire or chemicals.

**Fragile skin:** Newborn skin is more fragile than the skin of older children and adults. Elderly skin is thin and can be easily injured. Skin that has been previously damaged is at higher risk of further damage.

**General health:** Because the skin is an organ, it can be affected by a person's general health status. Here are some of the factors that may make skin more prone to damage:

- Some chronic and/or critical diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or cancer
- Certain medications, such as steroids and anticoagulants
- Poor nutrition

**Inability to see or feel:** When a person cannot see well or feel normal sensations of heat, cold or pain, they may be at higher risk of skin injury.

**Balance and mobility:** Poor balance or mobility can put a person at risk for falling or bumping into objects.

**Disclaimer:** The content in this resource is for informational purposes only and is NOT a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. You should always consult with your health-care professional before starting any new treatment or changing or stopping an existing treatment.

## Common types of skin injuries

**Bruises**, or contusions, are the result of hard contact with a person or an object. The impact causes an injury to the tissue beneath the skin surface, and blood from the injury settles near the skin. Bruises start out looking red, then within a few hours turn blue or purple, and finally turn yellow as they fade. (See Figure a.)



a. Bruise

**Scrapes**, or abrasions, are wounds in which layers of skin are scraped off. The most common sites for scrapes are the hands, elbows and knees. A common form of this, caused by a fall from a bicycle or skateboard, is called road rash. Although the scrapes may ooze blood initially, prolonged bleeding should not occur. (See Figure b.)



b. Scrape

**Cuts**, or lacerations, are wounds that are caused when an object, such as a kitchen knife, slices through the skin. Cuts usually bleed. (See Figure c.)



c. Cut

**Stab wounds**, or perforations, occur when a pointed object, such as a wood splinter, tack or knife tip, penetrates the skin. Bleeding is common. (See Figure d.)



d. Stab

**Skin tears** are wounds that happens when the skin separates or is peeled back by bumping into a hard object, like a coffee table. In very fragile skin it can happen even as a result of washing or drying the skin harshly or removing a wound dressing that has a strong adhesive. They most often happen on exposed areas such



e. Skin tear



f. Burn

as the arms or legs. Skin tears are most common in newborns, the elderly and people who are chronically ill. Long-term use of steroid drugs can also increase the risk. (See Figure e.)

**Burns** can be caused by hot or extremely cold objects, open flame, electricity, chemicals, the sun and other radiation (see Figure f).

## How can I prevent a skin injury?

### Create a Safe Environment

Creating a safe environment is one of the keys to protecting everyone, particularly those with easily injured skin.

Look around your home, work or play environment taking special note of any sharp or pointed objects, hard or rough surfaces and tripping and slipping hazards. Remove or replace anything that could cause a skin injury. Make sure all areas are well lit. Check electrical cords for exposed wires or damaged coverings. For more information on keeping your home safe, see [Keeping Your Home Safe](#).

#### Tip:

- If you or someone in your family is at risk for falls due to balance and/or mobility challenges or some other type of functional impairment, consider contacting an occupational therapist to conduct a home assessment and make recommendations on how you can create and maintain a safer environment.

### Protect Your Skin

If you take part in activities where skin injuries might occur, use caution and wear appropriate protective equipment. Make sure all equipment is free from damage (like sharp edges) and playing surfaces are level and without tripping hazards.

Protective devices may be necessary to protect those who are most vulnerable. For example, shin pads are a great idea for an elderly person to wear to protect from skin tears that might occur when knocking a shin on a coffee table or lowered dishwasher door. Some other ways to protect those at risk is to wear clothing, such as long sleeves, long pants/trousers, or knee-high socks.

The kitchen is a high-risk location for skin damage, so make sure to use potholders or oven mitts to transfer hot foods and finger guards when cutting and slicing. Do not wear loose fitting clothing around open flames such as candles and gas stoves.

Do not wear tight clothing or jewellery that could damage the skin, through rubbing, scraping or cutting.

Wear sunscreen and/or clothing like hats and long-sleeved tops to protect your skin from the sun.

### Maintain Good Skin Health

Follow a few simple steps to keep your skin healthy and lower your risk for injury.

- Use only mild, pH-balanced soap for cleansing skin. Do not over-clean skin as it can remove your skin's normal protective barrier.
- Use moisturizer two times per day, especially after bathing or showering. For the best effect, apply moisturizer after patting (not rubbing) your skin so it is still slightly damp.
- Use warm, not hot, water for bathing and showering.
- Keep fingernails and toenails cut short and filed to remove rough edges.
- Ensure clothing fits well and covers exposed, at-risk skin.

#### Tip:

- Avoid adhesive products on frail skin. If a person with frail skin needs a bandage (dressing) for an existing wound, use non-traumatic paper/silicone tapes to keep it in place. Make sure to take extra care during removal.

## What do I do if I get a skin injury?

- **Bruises:** Apply ice to stop the blood flow to the injury site to help limit the size of the bruise.
- **Scrapes:** Cleanse the scraped area gently but thoroughly to remove any debris (like gravel) and dirt.
- **Cuts:** Control the bleeding by applying gentle pressure to the wound with a gauze pad or clean cloth. If you are unable to control the bleeding, go to your local emergency department.
- **Stab wounds:** Apply pressure with a gauze pad or clean cloth to control bleeding. If you are unable to control the bleeding go to your local emergency department.
- **Skin tears:** Gently move or roll the torn skin with a moistened cotton swab back over the torn area.
- **Burns:** Run cool (not cold) water over the burn site for at least 10 minutes to minimize the extent of the burn.

Then, for all wounds with broken skin:

- Cleanse the wound thoroughly with clean, tepid water or a wound-cleansing solution.
- Remove any dirt and debris from the wound with tweezers. Make sure to clean the tweezers with rubbing alcohol before using them.
- Pat the area dry with a gauze pad or clean cloth.
- Apply a non-stick dressing over the wound or close the wound with closure strips (if advised by a health-care professional).
- Change the dressing if leakage occurs.

### CAUTION:

**Make sure your tetanus shot is up to date to protect you from a potentially deadly infection caused by a bacterium that enters your body through your broken skin.**

## When is my skin injury an emergency that requires professional help?

You may need medical attention if the wound:

- is deep—as it may involve blood vessels, nerves, tendons or bone (white)
- has exposed muscle tissue (red) or fat tissue (yellowish)
- opens up if you let go of the sides of the cut
- is on a joint or in an area where healing might be difficult (stitching may be needed)
- is visibly dirty after being cleaned
- has been bleeding longer than 10 minutes even though pressure has been applied
- becomes infected

## How can I tell if my skin injury is infected?

A wound that is healing normally will stay closed or get smaller in size over time. If you keep the area clean and protected, your chance of infection is usually low (see Caution below). Some signs of infection include:

- Increased discharge or pus
- Fever
- Increased pain
- Foul odour coming from the injury
- Redness, swelling or warmth in and around the affected area

If any of these signs appear, seek medical attention. To treat the infection your health-care professional will recommend or prescribe an antibiotic cream or ointment or, in more severe cases, a prescription for oral antibiotics.

### Tip:

- A non-infected injury to the skin does **not** need an antibiotic unless you are at high risk for infection and/or it is recommended by a health-care professional. (See Caution below.)

### Tip:

- Take a photo of the injury so you can compare the wound the next time you change the dressing.

**CAUTION:**

Some people are at higher risk for infection and may require professional support. These include people who:

- Have weakened immune systems (e.g., from chemotherapy medications used to treat cancer)
- Take medications that make the skin dry and fragile (e.g., prednisone)
- Take medications that decrease blood clotting (e.g., warfarin)
- Have diabetes
- Are elderly, as the skin gets thinner with age and healing happens more slowly

For more instructions on general wound care go to [Caring for Your Wound at Home: Changing a Dressing](#).



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**CARE AT HOME SERIES**

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Printed in Canada · 1946r1E

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