

# ■ Skin Wounds (Lacerations, Punctures, and Abrasions) ■

Cuts, punctures, and other skin wounds should be cleansed to prevent infection. Certain types of wounds require a visit to a doctor, including deep wounds, wounds in which the edges won't stay together, or wounds containing visible dirt. Some wounds require a tetanus "booster" shot, especially puncture wounds and unclean wounds.

## What are skin wounds?

A wound is any type of injury that causes a break in the skin:

- *Lacerations (cuts or incisions)*. Wounds caused by something sharp, such as a knife or broken glass. Cuts may cause a lot of bleeding.
- *Punctures*. Wounds caused by a pointed object stuck deep into the skin, such as a nail. If the puncture wound is deep and difficult to clean or if the object was contaminated, there is an increased risk of infection.
- *Abrasions (scrapes)*. Wounds caused by rubbing against something rough, such as a sidewalk. Abrasions are often contaminated by dirt or grit.

## What kinds of wounds require a doctor's visit?

Children with the following types of wounds should be taken to the doctor's office or emergency room:

- Deep or large wounds, especially:
  - Deep puncture wounds.
  - Wounds in which the edges won't stay together.
  - Wounds with deeper layers (fat or muscle) visible inside.
- Wounds with jagged edges.
- Wounds that don't stop bleeding after a few minutes or that spurt blood.
- Lacerations or puncture wounds with visible contamination, such as dirt or grit.
- Wounds that are very painful.
- Wounds on the face, unless they are very minor.

## What are some possible complications of skin wounds?

- Wounds may interfere with the function of the injured part (such as bending a finger or leg).
- If wounds don't heal properly, they may leave scars.
- Wounds may become infected, usually with bacteria. Without proper care, even minor wounds may lead to serious infections.
- One particularly serious infection is *tetanus* (sometimes called lockjaw). Tetanus vaccine prevents this complication. Your child may need a booster shot if his or her tetanus vaccinations are not up-to-date.

## What puts your child at risk of skin wounds?

- Obviously, children get a lot of cuts and scrapes. Most are minor and heal without problems.
- Provide age-appropriate supervision when children play. Make sure that play areas such as backyards are free of hazards that could cause injuries.

## How are wounds treated?

*Minor wounds* can be treated at home:

- Wash your hands with soap and water before cleaning the wound.
- Wash the area gently with soap and water, then rinse with lots of clean water. All dirt, sand, and debris need to be removed.
- To stop bleeding, put gentle pressure on the wound.
- Putting a thin layer of antibiotic ointment on the wound may help reduce pain and promote healing. However, to prevent infection, cleaning the wound is more important than using an antibiotic.
- After applying antibiotic ointment, place a bandage over the wound. This will help it heal more quickly.
- When a scab forms, be sure your child leaves it alone. Scabs serve the same purpose as bandages, sealing the wound off from germs. Picking at scabs increases the risk of infection.

*Other wounds* should be evaluated and treated by a health professional, including large wounds, wounds with

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jagged edges, deep puncture wounds, “dirty” wounds, and certain other types.



*Don't wait to see the doctor!* Cleanse the wound immediately, as described for minor wounds.

- At the emergency room or doctor's office, the wound will be carefully cleansed. This is especially important for abrasions or other wounds with visible dirt and for deep puncture wounds.
- *Tetanus prevention.* If your child's tetanus vaccinations are not up-to-date, he or she may need a tetanus booster shot. Unless you are positive your child has had a tetanus shot in the past 5 years and has had a total of three shots, a tetanus shot is needed after any wound involving a contaminated source.
- Even if your child's tetanus shots are up-to-date, vaccination is recommended after certain types of wounds that are at high risk of tetanus contamination, such as:
  - Animal bites.
  - Crush or puncture wounds.
  - “Dirty” wounds contaminated by soil, saliva, or feces. Immediate and thorough cleaning of such “dirty” wounds is essential to reduce the risk of tetanus as well as other infections. Home cleaning is a good start, but cleaning by a doctor or other health care professional is recommended for skin wounds that are deep or appear contaminated. Seek medical care immediately if your



child has a “dirty” wound with obvious contamination.

- *Stitches (sutures).* If the wound is large or deep or if the edges do not line up properly, the doctor may decide to place stitches, also known as sutures. This is done to promote proper healing while reducing the chances of scarring.
  - An anesthetic will be used so that your child will not feel pain when stitches are placed.
  - Your doctor will provide you with instructions for taking care of the stitches. Keep the area clean and covered, or as directed by your doctor.
  - Certain cuts may be treated with tissue adhesives (glues) instead of sutures.



### When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child has a wound and you are not sure whether medical attention is needed or if the wound shows any of the following signs of not healing properly:

- Wound edges are coming apart.
- Signs of infection (redness, soreness, tenderness, fever).
- For new or old wounds, call our office if your child is experiencing a lot of pain or is having difficulty moving the injured part.