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Cuts, Scratches, and Scrapes

You wipe out on your skateboard. The knife you're using slices your finger instead of the tomato. Your new puppy doesn't know how sharp his baby teeth are.

You might think a cut or scrape is no big deal, but any time the skin gets broken, there's a risk of infection. So it helps to understand how to care for cuts and scrapes at home — and know when you need to see a doctor.

What to Do

A small cut, scrape, abrasion will usually heal well without medical care. Here's what to do if the injury isn't serious:

- **Stop bleeding by pressing a clean, soft cloth against the wound for a few minutes.** If the wound is bleeding a lot, you'll need to hold pressure for longer (sometimes up to 15 minutes). If the wound is small, the bleeding should stop in a few minutes as the blood's clotting factors do their work to seal the wound.
- **As you keep the pressure on and the wound, avoid the urge to peek.** Lifting the bandage may start the bleeding again.
- **Clean the wound.** Run warm water over the cut for 5 minutes. Then use soap to gently wash the skin around the cut or scrape thoroughly. If there's dirt or debris in the wound (like gravel from a scrape), remove it if you can — a soft, damp cloth can help. Cleaning the wound helps get infection-causing bacteria out of the injured area. *If you can't get all the dirt out, call your doctor's office.*
- **If you want, put a light layer of an antibiotic ointment around the cut to kill germs.** Make sure you're not allergic to the medications in the ointment.
- **Dry the area lightly and cover it with gauze or other type of bandage.** A bandage helps prevent germs from getting into the wound and causing an infection. If the bandage gets wet or dirty, change it right away.
- **Each day, take off the bandage and gently wash the injury.** Watch for signs of infection.
- **To prevent infection and reduce scarring, don't pick at the scab or skin around the wound.**

When to Get Help

If blood is spurting out of a cut or it won't stop bleeding, get a parent or call your doctor right away. Cover the wound with a sterile bandage or clean cloth. If the blood soaks through, don't remove the first bandage — put a new covering on top of it. Raising the injured body part above your head (or holding it up as high as you can) may help slow the bleeding.

If a wound is very long or deep, or if its edges are far apart, a doctor will need to close it with stitches. A doctor or nurse will numb your skin with an anesthetic shot (sometimes they put an anesthetic cream on the skin first to numb the area). If you hate the idea of a shot, it can help to keep in mind that getting multiple stitches feels like getting multiple shots, so you're better off feeling only one!

If you get stitches, you'll probably need to go back to the doctor in 5 to 10 days to get them taken out (some stitches dissolve on their own). To remove stitches, a doctor or nurse will snip the thread with scissors and gently pull out the threads. It feels ticklish and a little funny, but usually doesn't hurt.

Doctors sometimes close small, straight cuts on certain parts of the body with medical glue or steri-strips (thin pieces of tape). Glue and steri-strips will dissolve or fall off on their own.

Getting a cut usually means that there will be some scarring. If your cut needs to be stitched or glued but you don't see a doctor in time, your scar may be more noticeable.

Avoiding Infection

Let a parent, coach, or other adult know if you get injured. You'll especially want to tell someone if you cut yourself on something dirty or rusty, if you are bleeding, or if you get bitten or scratched (by an animal or a person!).

Bites that break the skin need medical care. Germs from animal or human saliva can get into the wound, and you will usually need antibiotics to prevent infection. Your doctor or nurse will also want to make sure the animal

didn't have rabies.

Certain cuts or bites could lead to a tetanus infection if your tetanus shots are not up to date. You (or your mom or dad) will need to check your medical records to be sure that you have had a tetanus shot recently. If you haven't, you will probably need to get one when the cut is repaired.

Signs of Infection

Sometimes, a cut, scratch, or scrape starts out as no big deal, but then gets infected. A skin infection happens when there are too many germs for your body's white blood cells to handle.

If you notice any of these signs of infection, call your doctor right away:

- expanding redness around the wound
- yellow or greenish-colored pus or cloudy wound drainage
- red streaking spreading from the wound
- increased swelling, tenderness, or pain around the wound
- fever

The doctor will prescribe antibiotics to help your body fight off the infection.

Luckily, most small cuts, scratches, and abrasions will go away on their own, thanks to your body's amazing ability to heal itself. If a cut looks serious or infected, though, see a doctor.

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD

Date reviewed: January 2015

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