

# Scar Prevention

All the basics for healing faster, better, smoother

BY MELANIE HAIKEN

**N**o one wants a lifelong reminder of an accident or

operation. But if you follow old-fashioned patch-it-up advice, a scar may be in your future. That's because over the past 10 years, there's been a rethinking of how skin repairs itself, says Dan Dimitrijevic, PhD, director of the human cell and tissue engineering laboratories at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth. For example, skin care experts now know that cells regenerate faster in a moist environment, so leaving a cut open to the air to heal may promote scarring.

The following tips reflect the freshest approach to wound care. Follow them to help you heal as quickly—and as seamlessly—as possible.

## Act Fast

It's easier to close a wound cleanly just after it happens, says David Wilcox, MD, an emergency medicine doctor

at Middlesex Hospital in Middletown, CT, and spokesperson for the American College of Emergency Physicians. That's before exposed skin cells become dry and misshapen or infection sets in. If a cut is bigger than about an inch (½ inch on your face) or has ragged edges, see a doctor ASAP.

**Keep cuts clean...** Immediately wash the area with warm water and a gentle soap, and use sterile gauze to gently brush away dirt or other foreign matter. (See a doctor if gravel or glass is embedded in your skin.) Unless your physician prescribes it, skip disinfecting with hydrogen peroxide. "You may be killing germs, but you're also extending the time the wound is open and vulnerable," says Dimitrijevic.

**...And moist** Apply an over-the-counter antibiotic ointment to prevent infection and keep the wound moist, enhancing

collagen growth. (If you are sensitive to the commonly used neomycin-containing ointments, a doctor or pharmacist can recommend one with a different antibiotic or a plain petrolatum-based ointment.)

**...And covered** The golden rule of scar prevention is to *bandage*. Your goal is to keep dirt out and prevent a scab from forming. "New cells grow in from the sides and meet in the middle, and a scab gets in the way," explains Roy C. Grekin, MD, a clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco.

## Consult a Derm

If the wound is on your face or anywhere visible, see a dermatologist or plastic surgeon as soon as you can. "New skin cells form during the first 6 weeks after an injury, so laser treatment [see "Smarter Scar Therapy," at right] during that crucial time is most effective," says Tina Alster, MD, director of the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery in Washington, DC.

## Make Informed Choices

Even for minor surgery, discuss your scarring concerns with your doctor well before your final pre-op visit. The operation might be done through a telescope-like endoscope and require only a tiny cut. Or perhaps the incision can be placed in an inconspicuous spot, such as just below the pubic hairline or in a natural skin crease. If you're at risk of forming a keloid (a large, ropy scar),



## Smarter scar therapy

- **LIGHTEN** Topical treatment with tretinoin cream improves the appearance of acne scars and stretch marks—especially those that are still red. Hydroquinone, a bleaching agent, helps if skin is marred by scars that are darker than your normal skin tone.
- **SMOOTH** Laser treatment (shown above) has become the weapon of choice for minimizing most scars. Even stretch marks improve by 25 to 50%.
- **LIFT** Deep ice-pick scars may require subcision, in which a needle breaks up the fibers that pull the center of the pit down. Depressed scars can also be raised with filler injections.
- **REDO** Starting over is sometimes the best solution. Scar revision, a common term for cutting out the old scar, is typically reserved for large, deep, or raised scars that don't respond to other treatments.

let your doctor know in advance, advises Eliot F. Battle Jr., MD, a Washington, DC, dermatologist and keloid specialist. Applying special pressure bandages after surgery may prevent it. Once the wound has healed, over-the-counter scar treatment gels or sheets, such as ScarGuard ScarCare or Curad Scar Therapy Clear Pads (available at drugstores), may help level raised scars.

Melanie Haiken is a freelance writer based in northern California.

WOMAN: ROGER WRIGHT/GETTY IMAGES; BANDAGE: EYEWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

COURTESY OF TINA ALSTER, MD