

How to care for your sternal (breastbone) wound at home

Information for patients

This leaflet provides information and advice on caring for your sternal (breastbone) wound at home. There are different types of wounds, so it is important to follow any advice given on discharge. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the team caring for you.

Breastbone wounds

Breastbone incisions are often used during heart bypass surgery. Wounds will be stitched to hold the skin edges together and heal. The skin edges usually form a seal within a day or two, but this varies depending on the person.

Dressings

The purpose of a dressing is to protect the area until the wound is healed and to:

- absorb any leakage from the wound
- provide ideal conditions for healing
- prevent stitches or clips catching on clothing

If your wound needs ongoing dressings when you are discharged, the ward will give you a limited supply. You can get more dressings from either your GP or district nurse if you need them.

Stitches, clips and staples

Stitches are also known as sutures. These must be removed by a nurse or practice nurse, but some stitches are dissolvable and don't need to be removed. If you are told you need to have stitches removed, the nurse will ask you to make an appointment with your practice nurse to remove them. If you are house bound, the nurse will arrange for a community nurse to visit you at home.

Problems with wound healing

Most wounds heal without any problems. However, the most common complication is wound infection. This means that germs have started to grow in the wound, and this can delay normal wound healing.

Wound infections are usually treated by dressing the wound regularly and sometimes with a course of antibiotics. Sometimes surgery may be needed. Some people are more likely to develop wound infections than others and the surgeons will discuss this with you.

Those at higher risk include people who:

- smoke
- have diabetes
- have a condition or treatment that affects their immune system, such as leukaemia or chemotherapy
- have a major operation, such as bowel surgery, where diet is not giving enough nutrients for wound healing

Doctors and nurses will do everything they can to prevent your wound from becoming infected while you are in hospital. It is important that you know how to tell if you are developing an infection after you go home.

If a wound becomes infected it may:

- become more painful
- look swollen and/or red on white skin tones or discoloured on darker skin tones
- weep or leak some pus
- have an unpleasant smell
- be warm to the touch
- begin to open or gape

If you notice any of the signs above, have a fever, or have any concerns about your wound, contact your GP as soon as possible. Wound infections can be treated successfully, especially if we catch them early.

Caring for your wound

There are several things you can do to help lower the chance of your wound getting infected and to promote healing:

1. Changing the dressing

The original dressing should be left in place for up to four days (or as advised by the nurse or doctor), providing it is not oozing. The wound must be kept dry for four days. If the dressing becomes wet from blood or any other liquid, it must be changed.

Before you remove and change the dressing:

- wash your hands with soap and water
- carefully take the dirty dressing off
- do not touch the healing wound with your fingers

If the wound is healing, it can be left without a dressing. You may prefer to have a dressing to cover the wound for protection, especially when clothing can rub against it. When applying a new dressing, take care not to touch the inside of the dressing so that it stays clean. There is no need for antiseptic cream under the dressing. You can contact your GP, practice nurse or district nurse to help manage your dressings.

2. Bathing or showering

- Showers are recommended. Do not have baths as the pressure from lifting yourself from a low level can cause the wound to open.
- Non-waterproof dressings need to be removed before having a shower.

- Do not put any soap, shower gel, body lotion, talcum powder or other bathing products directly on the wound.
- Pat the wound gently with a clean towel after showering before drying the rest of the body.
- If you have a surgical wound on your arm or leg, use a clean separate towel to pat dry.

3. Other advice

- Chest drain sutures are usually removed on the day of discharge. If the sutures need to remain in, please book a practice nurse appointment at your GP surgery 7 to 10 days after the drains were removed to have the sutures removed.
- A healing wound may be itchy, numb or tingle, especially when there is hair growth in the area. This is a normal part of healing. Do not scratch as it can introduce infection. The wound can be very sensitive, wearing light cotton next to the skin can help.
- Protection of your breastbone is vital for your recovery. Support it when coughing by giving yourself a tight hug.
- All female patients should wear a soft, clean and comfortable front-fastening bra day and night for 6 to 8 weeks. Do not allow the bra to rub the incision and ideally leave the lower hooks unfastened. To avoid moisture build-up under the bust, use a clean small towel to pat dry.
- If you are diabetic, it is important to keep your blood glucose levels at your target range.

Who to contact

If you have any concerns about your wound, please contact your consultant's secretary via switch board, telephone number: **020 3299 9000** or send a message via the **MyChart app**.

MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care. To sign up or for help, call us on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.mychart@nhs.net. Visit www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart to find out more.

Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit www.kch.nhs.uk.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: **020 3299 4618**

Email: **kings.pals@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email **kings.access@nhs.net**

Surgical site infection Discharge Passport

Patient Name: _____

NHS No: _____

GP Name: _____

Date of admission: _____

Date of Operation: _____

Procedure: _____

Date of Discharge: _____

Date of first GP Practice nurse or District Nurse appointment: _____

Date of first cardiac rehab appointment: _____

Further instructions for patient:
