

**Sutures**  
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**What are Sutures?**

- Many people call them “stitches.”
- A “thread” placed on a needle and inserted into the skin to sew a wound together so it can heal.
- Sutures may be absorbable (dissolve in the skin) or nonabsorbable (need to be removed by a doctor within a specified time)

**Do I need Sutures?**

- This is best determined by a doctor.
- You may close small cuts by yourself with butterfly tape or adhesive strips.
- See a doctor if:
  - your wound is deep, jagged or the edges will not stay together.
  - the wound is on your face.
  - the wound has a foreign body or dirt that will not come out.
  - the wound bleeds in spurts, blood soaks through the bandage or the bleeding does not stop after 10 minutes of direct pressure.
  - the area around the wound is numb or you cannot move comfortably in the area of the wound.
  - the cut becomes inflamed or tender.
  - the cut drains thick, creamy fluid.
  - you develop a temperature over 100°F or notice red streaks forming near the wound.
- Regardless of the type of wound, you may need a tetanus shot if you have not had one in the past 5 years. See the paragraph below which discusses tetanus shots.

**Why should I get Sutures?**

- Faster wound healing
- Improved cosmetic result

**What are alternatives to Sutures?**

- Steri-strips or tape
- Skin adhesive
- Staples
- Nothing at all
  - Sometimes wounds are left open to heal if the wound is extremely contaminated or is the result of an animal bite
- Your doctor will determine what method is most appropriate for you.

**How do I care for my Sutures?**

- Leave the original bandage in place for 24 hours.

- Keep the wound as dry as possible. After the initial 24 hours you may shower or rinse the wound. However, you should not soak or immerse the wound in water. It is recommended you not go swimming, take baths, wash dishes (unless wearing rubber gloves) or get into hot tubs until the sutures are removed or for two weeks if your sutures are absorbable. Try not to hit the wound on anything. Elevate the wound, if possible, to reduce pain and swelling.
- After the first 24 hours, gently remove the bandage and wash the wound with soap and water or a mix of equal parts hydrogen peroxide and water. Cleansing two times each day will help to prevent debris buildup in the wound, which may cause a larger scar. It will help to prevent infection and will also help to make eventual removal of sutures less painful.
- You may apply antibiotic ointment three times each day to help prevent infection and thick scab formation, unless told otherwise by your doctor.
- A dressing is no longer needed when the edge of the wound closes, which is typically after approximately 48 hours, unless the sutures catch on clothing or with activity.

#### **When should I call my Doctor or go to the Emergency Department?**

- Seek medical attention when you notice any of the following signs of infection:
  - Drainage of pus or other material
  - Swelling
  - Increased Pain
  - Warmth near the wound
  - Redness
  - Fever
  - Separation of the wound
  - Red streaks coming from the wound
    - *You should go to the Emergency Department if your doctor is unable to see you the same day you notice the above symptoms.*
    - *You may need antibiotics if your doctor determines the wound is infected. You may need additional treatment such as drainage of the wound or early removal of the sutures, depending on the assessment.*
- Seek medical attention if your wound is bleeding or if the sutures fall out.
- See your doctor as directed to have sutures removed.
- Follow any additional directions given by your doctor at the time your sutures are placed. For example, your doctor may want to see you in a couple of days to observe the progress.
- Call for any questions or concerns.

#### **When can my sutures be removed?**

- The sutures should come out when the skin is strong enough to stay together. Typically this is between 3 and 14 days.
- Sutures on the face are usually removed after 3-5 days. Sutures in areas of high stress say in longer—up to 14 days.
- Be sure to get sutures removed when told to do so. Sutures removed too late may cause skin marks or worsened scarring. In addition, delays may cause suture removal to be more difficult.
- Do not remove sutures yourself.

#### **What about scarring and wound care after sutures?**

- Yes, you will have a scar. However, the location and nature of the wound, whether an infection occurred and whether the sutures were removed in time all determine the extent of the scar that develops.
- Sunlight can cause permanent discoloration of the scar during the first six months. Using sunscreen of SPF 15 or higher will help to reduce this effect. Of course, it is recommended that you always wear sunscreen to protect your skin.
- Protect the wound from injury for the month following suture removal.
- Avoid sports or activity that could harm the wound.
- Do not try to remove the scab. Allow it to fall off naturally.
- The wound may take many months to heal completely.

**Do I need a tetanus shot?**

- Tetanus is a life-threatening illness.
- You may need a tetanus shot if it has been more than 5 years since your last one.
- Even if you have had a tetanus shot earlier in your life, you should follow your doctor's guidance regarding any additional immunizations that are required.

References:

<http://familydoctor.org>

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