Open Wound Care: Discharge Instructions

This information will tell you how to care for your wound. If you have any questions or concerns, please talk with your doctor or nurse.

You have an open wound, versus a closed wound, which is sutured or stapled. The skin over the wound is left open so the deep tissues may heal before the skin is allowed to heal. Premature closure or healing of the skin can result in infection. Your wound was left open to allow new tissue growth within the wound itself.

The wound is covered with 2 types of dressing, each serving a specific purpose.

The Outer Dressing
- Protects the skin around the wound from further injury.
- Absorbs drainage.
- Helps keep the wound clean.

The Inner Packing
- Helps keep the wound tissue clean and moist.
- Helps prevent infection.
- Prevents premature healing of skin.
- Protects the wound from further injury.

At first, the wound is packed tightly to help prevent bleeding. Later, the wound is loosely packed to allow the wound to close from the deepest portion first.

Supplies Needed
- 2” x 2” or 4” x 4” gauze sponges. (Avoid cotton-lined gauze sponges because the fibers can stick to the wound and cause problems.)
- Paper or silk tape.
- Salt water or saline solution. A prescription may be needed to purchase saline at the drug store, or you may make your own salt water solution. (The solution is made by boiling 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 quart of water for 5 minutes. Store solution in a closed glass container that has been boiled in water for 4 minutes. Cool solution before using.)
- Sterile cotton swabs.
- Tweezers. (Before using tweezers, boil them in water for 4 minutes. Then, drain the water from the pan and allow them to cool.)
- Plastic bag for disposing of used dressings.
- Clean gloves.

**Clean Technique**
Clean technique prevents bacteria from invading your supplies and wound. Keep your supplies in their packages until you are ready to use them. A clean work surface and careful handwashing are very important.

**Preparing the Work Area**
Tables and surfaces in your home normally have dust and some germs. It is best to choose a work area away from household traffic and distraction.
- Choose a work surface such as a table, TV tray or countertop.
- If the surface is washable, clean it with soap and water; dry with a clean towel or paper towel.
- If the surface is not washable, wipe it free of dust and spread a clean towel or paper towels over the surface.
- Avoid coughing or sneezing on the clean surface.

**Handwashing**
Be sure to wash your hands carefully with soap before and after each dressing change.

**Procedure**

**How to remove the dressing and packing:**
- Wash your hands thoroughly.
- Open and prepare all of the needed dressings and supplies. For example, tear the pieces of tape you will use in advance. This is very important if you do not have someone helping you.
- Apply gloves.
- Loosen and remove the outer dressing by holding onto the skin and pulling the tape off toward the wound. Discard the dressing in a plastic bag. Be sure to keep soiled dressings away from children and pets.
If instructed, apply water to the dressing in the wound before removing it, using the shower or sitz bath. This helps prevent bleeding and discomfort when the packing is removed.

Slowly remove the packing. Make sure all of the packing is removed. Discard the packing. Discard in the plastic bag. Wash hands.

How to pack the wound and dress it:

- Apply new, clean gloves.
- Moisten, but do not soak gauze sponges in a salt water or saline solution. Gently squeeze out excess water.
- Pack the wound. (See Figure A for packing a small wound; Figure B for packing a large wound.)
- Unfold gauze sponge into a single layer. Pick up the moistened gauze sponge and place the remaining clean, untouched corner into the wound. Pack the gauze into the wound. You may use sterile cotton swabs or clean tweezers for small wounds. Although the packing should fill the wound, it should not be forced tightly into the wound. Any gauze ends that do not fit into the wound should be neatly placed on top of the wound.

To apply a new outer dressing, layer sterile 4" x 4" gauze sponges over the wound. Pick them up by the corner only. Cover the wound evenly. Secure the dressing to the skin with tape. Use tape around the 4 outer edges of the dressing. (See Figure C.)
Questions and Answers

- **How often should I change the dressing?**
  Change as instructed by your doctor. Usually, the dressing is changed 2 times a day while there is pus or drainage. Then, when the wound looks clean, dressing is changed daily.

- **How long do I need to pack the wound?**
  Wounds are packed until deep tissue is healed. Then, packing is discontinued so skin can come together. Follow the instructions of your doctor or nurse.

When to Call the Doctor

- Temperature over 101.5° F.
- Chills.
- Foul-smelling drainage or fluid from the wound.
- Increased redness or swelling of the wound or skin around it.
- Increasing tenderness or pain in or around the wound.

If you have any questions or concerns, please call your doctor.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women’s Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.