

Upper Limb Unit

Hand Therapy – Scar management

Scar management

Scar tissue forms as part of the healing process after any injury to the skin or soft tissues. A scar will begin to form about three weeks after an injury or surgery and may continue changing for up to 18 months.

The scar will never look like ordinary skin. But with proper care during the growth period, the result will be a soft, pale, supple, and flat scar.

How scars form

The new skin behaves in a different way to normal skin. In normal skin, there are lots of tiny thread-like structures called collagen fibres. These lie in flat, orderly rows and give the skin elasticity and a 'bouncy' feel.

In scar tissue, the fibres form knots and become lumped together rather than sitting in neat lines. These knotted collagen fibres can make the scar appear raised and uneven. Your scar may also be red. This redness is caused when tiny blood vessels become trapped under the surface of the scar.

Scar tissue is also less flexible than normal skin. If it is over a joint, it may limit movement of the joint. Scar tissue may also stick to important structures beneath the skin such as tendons. This will also limit movement.



Patient Information

Occasionally more specific problems can develop with a scar. The scar may become hypertrophic or keloid.

Hypertrophic scars

Scars become hypertrophic when too much scar tissue is formed within the original area of the wound. These scars are usually very red and raised and may also be painful or itchy. They are more likely after burns and in young or people with darker skin.

Keloid scars

Keloid scars are an overgrowth of scar tissue and develop beyond the original area of the wound. These scars are thick, rounded, and bulky. Keloid scars may also be particularly red, painful, and itchy. Cauliflower ears are one example of a keloid scar.

Looking after your scar

You can help reduce the amount of scarring by carrying out a few easy steps. None of these treatments will work in isolation. But when combined, they should produce a good result.

Scar massage

Scars often become dry and itchy. It is important to moisturise regularly using a thick non-perfumed cream such as E45, Nivea, or QV cream. This will help soften the scar and keep it supple. Massage will also help to reduce joining of the scar and other structures.

Do not use aqueous cream. This has been found to cause some thinning of the skin in some people.

- Apply firm pressure to the scar. You should see your skin go white and move as you massage. Use small circular movements going across the scar along its full length.
- Try to stretch the scar along its length as you work in the cream.
- Massage for around five minutes until the cream is absorbed.
- Carry out this process at least three times a day.

Silicone gel

Silicone gel helps to keep the scar moist and improve its appearance. It is not understood exactly how silicone works. It's thought that pressure, warmth, and moisture reduce blood flow to the skin meaning that less scar tissue forms.

- Apply the gel to clean dry skin and hold it securely in place with a bandage or splint.
- Apply for a short period, then check for any sign of irritation.
- If no reaction occurs, the gel can be worn overnight.
- Re-use the gel multiple times and replace only when it begins to dry out and crumble.
- The gel can be washed in warm soapy water, rinsed thoroughly and dried.
- When not in use, return the gel to the foam layers. Store in an airtight bag in a cool place.

Elastomer

Elastomer is another silicone-based product. It consists of putty and a catalyst moulded together to form a mouldable material. Elastomer is individually made and moulded to your scar. It should be used in the same way as silicone gel.

Splints

Splints are worn to stretch scar tissue and prevent tightness over a joint. They are usually worn when you are asleep to give the scar tissue a slow, prolonged stretch. Splints are made from a lightweight material which is softened in water so that it can mould.

Compression/Pressure garments

We may use a compression bandage to apply pressure to your scar to encourage it to flatten out. This treatment is often combined with silicone gel or Elastomer to achieve a soft flat scar.

Patient Information

Sometimes a pressure garment may also be provided as part of your therapy to encourage the scar tissue to form in a less bulky way. If this is appropriate, your therapist will discuss this further with you.

Contact details

Please speak to your therapist about any information in this leaflet. Or contact us:

University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire

Physiotherapy: Tel **024 7696 6013**

Occupational Therapy Upper Limb Service: Tel **024 7696 6016**

Rugby St Cross

Therapy Department: Tel **01788 663257**

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