

# Skin Tears

## What is a skin tear?

A skin tear is an injury that causes the skin to peel back or can result in total skin loss. Older people and new-born babies are at the highest risk.

In most people they cause minor wounds and often bruising, however, they can cause more serious wounds if your skin is fragile, and you have other health issues.

Skin tears mostly occur on the legs, arms, and the back of the hands.



A skin tear on the lower leg

## Causes of skin tears

Most skin tears occur from falls, knocks, and bumps, or removal of skin tapes or plasters.

### Other risk factors for skin tears:

- Dry, fragile skin
- Poor nutrition and/or fluid intake
- When needing assistance with activities such as bathing and dressing
- Multiple medications especially long-term steroids
- Chronic health conditions
- Smoking ages the skin

A skin tear is an injury that may be covered by ACC. Ask your health professional to fill in an ACC form to help cover the costs of your treatment.

ACC may also have ways to help you prevent falls or other injuries that have caused your skin tear.

Skin tears normally heal in around 14–21 days and it is important to keep the wound clean and dry until this has happened.

## What can you do to prevent skin tears?

### 1. Making your home as safe as possible

- Keep floors clear and move objects that you might trip on such as rugs or furniture
- Place protectors on sharp edges of furniture or mobility aids
- Make sure your home is well-lit especially at night

### 2. Have a healthy diet, stay hydrated and keep active

- Remember to wear sensible, comfortable shoes to avoid falls

### 3. Looking after your skin

- Use a low allergy moisturiser, at least daily, to hydrate dry skin and reduce the risk of skin tears
- Soap can dry your skin, use a soap free or pH balanced product
- Wear long sleeves and pants to protect your skin, or limb protectors
- Keep your fingernails and toenails short and filed. See a podiatrist if you have poor eyesight or diabetes
- Don't use tape or plasters on fragile skin



Moisturise your skin at least daily to twice a day to help prevent skin tears

### What should you do if you have a skin tear?

You can do some basic first aid at home. Your pharmacy can help with a first aid kit so you have supplies on hand.

#### First Aid

- Wash your hands
- To stop bleeding use a clean damp cloth and press down on the tear, this may take 10-20 minutes. Lifting the effected arm or leg can help the bleeding slow down
- Very gently dab-clean the skin tear with warm, clean water, or antiseptic if there is dirt in the wound
- Gently pat dry with a clean cloth. Be very careful - do not rub
- If a skin flap is still attached but out of place, try to replace it by gently rolling the skin back over the wound, but do not stretch the skin. Using a wet cotton bud can help
- Cover the wound with a clean, non-stick dressing pad and secure the dressing with a bandage
- In fragile skin avoid skin closure strips and sticking plasters as they can cause more skin damage
- When changing the dressing, peel it away gently in the direction of the skin flap. If you pull it in the other direction, you could re-open the skin tear

### When should you seek further help?

Your healthcare provider can offer you advice. For example, they can ensure you get the correct dressing, prescribe a moisturiser, and organise a home assessment and support for you if needed.

### Skin tear complications

Skin tears can lead to complications such as ongoing pain, infection, and delayed healing.

#### If any of the following occur, you should seek medical attention:

- If you are uncomfortable with treating your skin tear
- If the injury is on your leg and you have blood flow concerns or diabetes
- Blood soaks through your bandage
- You have spreading heat, redness, swelling, pus, or the wound smells
- You have a fever or generally feel unwell
- Your pain is getting worse
- Your skin tear opens again
- If it is a deep injury or exposed to soil you may need a tetanus injection
- If your wound does not heal

### Further information

For more information see your Pharmacist, GP or call Healthline: **0800 611 116**  
ACC: <https://www.acc.co.nz/>  
NZWCS: <https://www.nzwcs.org.nz/>

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