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Products listed or pictured are examples only and do not represent an endorsement of any company or particular product

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Skin Tears

Information for health professionals



Skin Tears

What is a skin tear?

A skin tear is “a traumatic wound ... as a result of friction alone or shearing and friction forces which separate the epidermis from the dermis (partial thickness wound), or which separate both the epidermis and dermis from underlying structures (full-thickness wound)”

(Payne & Martin 1993).

Risk factors for skin tears

- History of previous skin tears
- Poor nutritional and/or hydration status
- Cognitive impairment
- Dependency with repositioning
- Impaired mobility
- Impaired sensory perception
- Comorbidities
- Bruising, discolouration, oedema, skin changes related to ageing or critical illness
- Fragile, dry, flaking skin with poor elasticity
- Polypharmacy



Skin tear management

- Control bleeding and pain
- Gently irrigate the wound with warm clean water or saline. Clean under the flap to remove debris or clots. Pat dry surrounding skin.
- Realign any skin or flap by rolling skin with moist cotton bud. Do not stretch to 'make it fit'.
- Assess and document cause of skin tear, client's health, pain, wound characteristics, amount of tissue loss, flap colour, and surrounding skin
- Classify the wound using a skin tear classification system
- If bruised or discoloured skin is present, reassess within 48 hours
- Apply a low-adherent dressing to avoid trauma e.g. soft silicones. Avoid using tape.
- Extend dressing over wound edge by at least 2cm. Draw an arrow on top of the dressing to indicate direction for removal.
- Leave in place for five–seven days, or change if there is 75% strikethrough leakage visible
- Apply limb protector or tubular retention bandage to hold dressing in place



Skin tear prevention strategies

- Assess skin daily and implement a prevention protocol for those at risk
- Use an emollient soap substitute
- Apply moisturiser to the skin twice daily
- Use correct lifting and transfer techniques
- Use caution when bathing and dressing
- Avoid direct contact that will pull the skin, e.g. use slide sheets
- Protect fragile skin—use limb protectors and/or long sleeves or pants
- Pad or cushion equipment and furniture (e.g. bed rails, wheelchairs)
- Use pillows (satin or silk covers reduce friction and shear) to position people who are less mobile
- Avoid tapes or adhesives, use tubular retention bandages and non-adhesive dressings
- Provide a safe environment to minimise falls risk
- Review medications