



Skin Tears

Common in older adults, and largely preventable

What is a skin tear?

A skin tear is a wound caused by friction or a shearing force that separates the top layer of skin from the layer beneath it. It often leaves a flap of skin still attached at one edge.

They happen most often on the forearms, the backs of the hands, and the shins. They are extremely common in adults over 65, and they can occur from something as small as bumping a doorframe, a bed rail, or having a bandage pulled off.

Why older skin tears so easily

With age the skin gets thinner, the layer of fat underneath shrinks, and the 'glue' holding the layers together weakens. Long-term steroid use, blood thinners, sun damage over the years, and dry skin all make it worse. Blood thinners do not cause the tear, but they make the bruising and bleeding much more dramatic.

First aid: what to do in the first few minutes

- Stay calm. These bleed and look alarming, but most are not dangerous.
- Apply gentle pressure with a clean, damp cloth to stop the bleeding.
- Rinse gently with saline or clean water. Do not scrub.
- If there is a flap of skin, gently roll it back over the wound with a damp cotton swab or gloved fingertip. Do not force it or trim it off. That flap is living tissue and it is the best possible dressing.
- Cover with a non-stick dressing.
- Draw an arrow on the outer dressing pointing in the direction the dressing should be removed, so the flap is not pulled off at the next change.
- Call us. We will assess it and set up the right dressing plan.



How we treat it

- **Preserving the skin flap.** Whenever the flap is viable we keep it in place. It often heals right back down.
- **Non-adherent dressings.** Silicone contact layers, foam with silicone borders, or petrolatum gauze. These lift off without taking skin with them.
- **No tape directly on fragile skin.** We use tubular or roll gauze, or silicone-bordered dressings, instead.
- **Longer wear times.** The fewer dressing changes, the less risk of another tear.
- **Protecting the surrounding skin** with barrier products and daily moisturizer.

Preventing the next one

- Moisturize arms and legs twice a day with a plain, fragrance-free cream. This alone cuts skin tears substantially.
- Wear long sleeves and long pants, or protective arm sleeves, for everyday activity.
- Pad bed rails, wheelchair arms and footplates, and sharp furniture corners.
- Keep pathways clear and well lit, and remove throw rugs.
- Keep fingernails and toenails short, including pets' nails.
- Never rip a bandage off. Loosen the edge and peel back low and slow, supporting the skin with your other hand.
- Stay hydrated and eat enough protein.
- Ask about a home safety and falls review. Most skin tears happen during transfers and bumps.

When to call us right away

- Bleeding that does not stop after 10 to 15 minutes of steady pressure
- The skin flap turning dark, dusky, or gray
- Increasing redness, warmth, swelling, or pain
- Cloudy, yellow, green, or foul-smelling drainage
- Fever or chills
- A tear that is very large, very deep, or where you cannot bring the edges near each other