

Cuts and grazes

Introduction

Cuts and grazes are among the most common of all injuries. Minor cuts and grazes (that do not go right through the skin) usually heal without causing any problems unless they become infected, or cause an unwelcome visible scar. Deeper cuts may damage important structures below the skin, such as nerves, blood vessels, or tendons.

Cuts

A cut, or laceration, is a tear, or split, in the skin. They are usually caused by a sharp edge of some kind, and some are more serious than others. A cut to the surface of the skin will often scab over and heal with little, or no, treatment. However, there may be a risk of a cut becoming infected, or leaving a scar once it has healed. Deeper, full thickness cuts can be very serious, particularly if they sever arteries, or other structures, such as veins, or nerves.

Grazes / Friction Burn

A graze, or abrasion, is an injury to the skin, where the skin is scraped off against a rough surface. Most grazes only take off the surface layer of skin which leaves a raw tender area underneath. However, some grazes can be much deeper and, in rare cases, the deeper layers of skin can be removed. Falls, scrapes and friction burns can all cause grazes.

Most cuts and grazes can be easily treated by cooling the area under cold running water.. However, more severe cases may need medical attention, such as stitches (sutures) to close the wound. The most common complication which can occur from a cut or graze is an infection, such as tetanus.

When should I seek medical help for a cut or laceration?

Most clean minor cuts and grazes can be managed at home by cleaning the wound and applying a simple dressing, such as a suitable sized plaster. **However, you should seek medical help in the circumstances outlined below.**

When the cut is deep and there is a possibility that structures below the skin may be injured. Signs of this include:

- numbness which indicates an injury to a nerve,
- blood spurting from the wound, or bleeding that does not stop after five minutes of continuous firm pressure (this may indicate an injury to a major blood vessel), and
- any deep cut to the palm of the hand, or sole of the foot, that may cause injury to tendons.

The cut is at risk of becoming infected. Signs of this include:

- the cut has become contaminated with things such as soil, faeces, or saliva,
- the cut was made by something that may have been in contact with things such as soil, faeces or saliva, and
- where fragments of material can be seen in the wound, or in cases where the cut has been caused by glass, shards of glass may be inside the wound, but unseen.

The cut cannot be properly closed with a suitably sized plaster. Signs include:

- any gaping cut, when the edges of the cut cannot easily be brought together with a plaster, or when the edges of the cut are pulled apart by normal movement, such as a cut over the knee, and
- any cut where a visible scar is unwelcome, such as on a prominent part of the face.

The cut or graze has become infected, indicated by:

- swelling of the affected area,
- pus in or coming from the wound,
- redness spreading from the wound, or
- increasing pain from the wound.