

How to Clean Cuts

Expert
Reviewed

Two Methods: [Initially Cleaning the Cut](#) [Seeking Medical Help](#)

Cuts are common, and it is important to know how to clean them. Proper cleaning helps to promote healing and also to avoid the development of any complications, such as infection. In addition to knowing how to clean a cut well, it is also key to know when to seek medical help for any complications to the healing process.

Method
1

Initially Cleaning the Cut

1 Wash your hands.^[1] Before attempting to clean a cut, either on yourself or on another person, it is key that your own hands be clean. This way, you will not introduce any germs or foreign substances into the cut that may later cause it to become infected.

- If available, put on some single-use gloves after washing your hands for more protection

2 Stop the bleeding.^[2] Before cleaning the cut, it is also key to stop the bleeding. For minor cuts and scratches, this may not be an issue. However, for wounds that are bleeding more heavily try elevating the injured area above the level of the heart (as this decreases blood flow to the area), and apply gentle pressure as needed. You can use a clean cloth to apply the pressure, as this will also soak up any blood as it appears.

- If the cut is from a large stabbing object that remains imbedded in the person's body, do not attempt to remove it, as this will cause more bleeding. Seek emergency attention.
- Note that if the bleeding does not slow down or stop with these steps, you may need to go into the Emergency Room. Although most small cuts will stop bleeding within five or so minutes, if the blood keeps pouring out you will definitely want to see a doctor sooner rather than later as your cut will likely need professional medical attention, as well as possible stitches.

3 Rinse the wound with clear water.^[3] Assuming that you have achieved hemostasis (which is the medical word for stopping the bleeding), you can proceed with steps to clean the cut. Start by rinsing the cut with clear water and a mild cleanser. You do not need to use hydrogen peroxide or an iodine-containing cleanser. These may actually irritate the cut more than help it to heal. Simple soap and water is effective enough for the cleaning process.

- Rinse for at least two minutes, and until the wound looks clean.

4 Remove any foreign material from the cut.^[4] Use tweezers if needed to get out any debris from the site of the wound. However, be careful not to make the wound worse as you try to get things out of it. Note that if there is a significant amount of foreign material lodged in the cut, it is best to see a doctor rather than to attempt to get it out yourself. This is because failure to get it out may result in infection, or you may make the cut worse in your attempts to clear it all out.

- Therefore, if cleaning the debris out of the cut is simple, you may do it yourself; however, if it looks daunting (or appears that you might cause further injury trying to get it out), see a doctor for professional help.
- Again, if there is a large object imbedded in the wound (such as a knife left in a stab wound), leave it in place and get emergency assistance immediately.

5 Apply an antibiotic cream or ointment.^[5] Once you have cleaned the wound and removed any debris, apply an antibiotic cream or ointment such as Polysporin over the injured area. Apply a light covering over the entire wound. This not only helps to prevent bacterial infection, it also helps to moisturize the cut which can speed up healing.

Cover the cut with a bandage.^[6] Place a bandage over the cut to first of all hold the cream or ointment in place, and

- 6** secondly to protect the wound from any further damage. If it is just a small cut or scratch that looks like it will easily heal on its own, covering it may not be needed. However, if in doubt, use a bandage to be safe rather than sorry and to ensure the fastest healing. Be sure to change the bandage every 24 hours.
- If the wound looks too big to be covered by a bandage, you may need to look for a larger bandage, or to see a doctor to wrap it if it is a large wound. Consider a compress and rolled gauze.

- 7** **Consider the date of your last tetanus immunization.**^[7] The risk of contracting a tetanus infection is highest with puncture wounds, or with wounds that contain foreign material in them. A small cut or scratch is unlikely to be a significant worry. However, if in doubt, see your healthcare professional to discuss whether or not he advises a tetanus immunization at this time. If you have been immunized within the last 10 years, you will be fine as the shot is effective for 10 years.

Method 2

Seeking Medical Help

- 1** **Consider if stitches may be needed.** When you examine the cut, it is important to assess whether the edges of the cut fit nicely together. In a small cut or scratch you have nothing to worry about. However, if you have an open wound and it is hard to pull the edges of the wound together, you will want to see a doctor to consider stitches. The advantage of stitches is that they hold the edges of the wound in place in exactly the position that is ideal for healing. Also, the sooner you receive stitches the better, as having them put in sooner rather than later (if they are needed) diminishes scarring and improves healing.
- 2** **Be on the lookout for signs of infection.**^[8] These include redness and warmth around the cut, significant swelling, pus-like drainage from the area of the cut, and/or fever. See your doctor immediately if you suspect your cut may be infected.
- 3** **Know when to see a doctor.** If the cut is severe enough to show tendons or ligaments, muscle, nerves, blood vessels, or bone, you should definitely see a doctor as this is considered a deep wound that merits medical attention.^[9] Also, if the bleeding does not stop, and/or if you have numbness, tingling, or loss of sensation, go to the Emergency Room immediately. All of these are signs of a more severe injury that warrant professional attention and evaluation.
- Always see a doctor if you have been bitten by an animal.
 - Also see your physician if you have a puncture wound from stepping on a nail or other foreign object.
 - Both of these situations will require infectious disease precautions.

Sources and Citations

1. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000043.htm>
2. <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/wound-healing-and-risk-factors-for-non-healing>
3. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/first-aid/first-aid-cuts/basics/art-20056711>

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