

Is my wound infected?

After an operation it is completely natural to keep a close eye on your wound and wonder whether it's healing as it should. The good news is that the great majority of surgical wounds heal without any trouble at all. A few even look a little angry in the first day or two and then settle down perfectly. The aim of this page is simple: to help you tell ordinary, healthy healing apart from the handful of signs that mean you should pick up the phone.

The single most useful thing to remember is the **direction of travel**. Normal healing gets a little **better every day**. An infection gets **worse** – the redness creeps outward, the pain climbs instead of easing, and you start to feel off in yourself. If things are steadily improving, that is reassuring. If they are clearly going the wrong way, that is your cue to act.

What's normal in the first few days

In the first few days a healing wound often looks and feels like this – none of it is cause for alarm:

- **A thin line of mild redness right at the wound edges.** A narrow pink or red rim hugging the incision is the body doing its repair work. It should stay close to the wound, not spread out across the surrounding skin.
- **Some bruising** around the area, which may spread and change colour (purple, then green-yellow) as it fades over a week or two.
- **Mild swelling** and a snug, slightly firm feeling around the incision.
- **A small amount of clear or blood-tinged ooze** in the first day or so, especially onto the dressing. Early drainage that is thin and clear or only faintly pink is expected.
- **Tenderness that steadily improves.** The wound will be sore to begin with, but the soreness should ease day by day as the days pass.

If your wound is following this pattern – settling, drying up, becoming less sore – it is almost certainly healing exactly as it should.

The warning signs of infection

Get in touch if you notice any of the following, especially if more than one is present or they are getting worse:

- **Redness that is spreading or expanding** away from the wound, rather than staying as a thin line at the edges.
- **Pain that is increasing after the first 2–3 days** – pain that climbs or becomes throbbing once it should be settling, rather than easing.
- **The area feeling hot** to the touch.
- **Increasing swelling** around the wound.
- **Pus, or yellow or green discharge** – thick, cloudy or coloured fluid (quite different from the early thin, clear ooze).
- **An unpleasant smell** coming from the wound or dressing.
- **The wound edges opening up** or pulling apart rather than knitting together.
- **Red streaks spreading up the limb** away from the wound.
- **Feeling generally unwell, feverish, hot and cold, or shivery.**

None of these on its own means disaster, but together they are the body signalling that the wound needs attention rather than just time.

What to do

If you think your wound might be infected, **don't sit on it for days hoping it settles**. Contact the surgical team (ring the rooms) or your GP promptly so it can be looked at. A wound infection caught early is usually a straightforward problem – a course of antibiotics, started in good time, sorts most of them out without any drama. The thing that turns a minor infection into a bigger one is leaving it too long. We would always far rather hear from you and find that all is well than have you wait at home while a treatable problem builds.

When you call, it helps to be able to describe what you're seeing: how the redness has changed, whether there's any discharge and what colour it is, whether the pain is better or worse than yesterday, and whether you feel unwell in yourself or have had a temperature.

When it's urgent – seek same-day care

Most wound concerns can be sorted with a prompt phone call in working hours. But some signs point to a deeper or spreading infection and need **urgent, same-day review** – through your surgical team, an after-hours service, or your nearest emergency department:

- **A fever, or feeling hot and cold, shivery or genuinely unwell.**
- **Redness that is spreading quickly** across the surrounding skin.

- **Red streaks** running up the arm away from the wound.
- Rapidly increasing pain or swelling, or the wound edges opening with significant discharge.

These can be signs that an infection has gone beyond the skin, and they shouldn't wait. Trust your instinct – if something feels clearly wrong, it is always better to be checked and reassured than to leave it.

For everyday questions about looking after your healing wound, dressings and showering, see our **wound care** page. And whenever you're unsure, ring the rooms – that's exactly what we're here for.