Why your wound isn't healing as expected and what to do

Almost everyone will have experienced a wound at some point during their lifetime, and more often than not, they go on to heal without a problem. Unfortunately, sometimes a wound can linger and prove difficult to heal. Here we explain why this may be the case and what to do about it.

Most people have experienced life with a wound, from childhood scrapes to minor injuries such as burns, scratches and cuts while doing jobs around the home. You may have had a surgical procedure resulting in a surgical wound. These types of wounds are known as acute wounds and usually heal uneventfully without causing too much of a problem. However, sometimes a wound doesn't heal within the expected timeframe, and this can result in symptoms such as pain and discomfort, as well as an increased risk of infection. Such wounds are known as chronic wounds. It is good to know if you have any factors that might be affecting your ability to heal, so they can be addressed if possible, to improve your chances of healing. The reasons why a wound may not heal can be split into person-related and wound-related factors, and here we present some of them.

Person-related factors

Age

As we age, particularly once we are over the age of 65 years, our skin structure changes becoming less elastic and more fragile. These changes make the skin more prone to injury, and make wound healing more difficult. Although there isn't anything we can do about getting older, we can take measures to keep our skin in good health, including carrying out a daily skin routine to keep it clean and well moisturised. Using an unperfumed moisturiser can help to keep the skin supple and sooth any irritation caused by dryness. The skin has a large water content, and when well hydrated, is plump and more resilient. While carrying out your skin care routine, look at your skin for any changes in its condition and if concerned, contact your healthcare professional for advice.

Illness

Some medical conditions may result in delayed healing as they can have a negative effect on the supply of oxygen, cells and nutrients needed for healing to occur. For example, diabetes and some lung, kidney and liver diseases can result in poor blood circulation or oxygen supply to the wound, which is vital for the cells that repair the wound. Although some medical conditions can't be cured, they can be well managed. For example, people with diabetes can optimise their blood sugar levels to minimise their risk of complications.

Nutrition

If you have a poor diet, you may be short of the nutrients you need for wound healing to take place. When you have a wound, your body needs vitamins, minerals, extra protein and calories for healing to occur. Anyone, regardless of weight, can be malnourished and deficient in vitamins and minerals. The Eatwell Guide shows the proportions in which different types of foods are needed to have a well-balanced and healthy diet[1]. You can read more about nutrition on pages 26–7.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle choices, such as not taking enough exercise, smoking, drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs can all negatively impact on healing. For example, smoking affects the immune system and the blood circulation, both of which are vital for wound healing. It also reduces the oxygen and nutrients that reach the wound and increases the risk of infection. You can read about smoking cessation on page 22.

Medications

Some medications or treatments can have an effect on wound healing, such as steroids and chemotherapy. Steroids can generally affect the cells involved in wound healing and because it dampens down the immune system, it can increase the risk of an infection.

Family history

Some conditions, e.g. venous disease and diabetes, may run in your family. This may make you prone to developing a wound, and how it heals. If you know you are at risk, you can take steps to prevent a wound from developing.

Source: 1.NHS UK (2022) The Eatwell Guide. Available online: The Eatwell Guide - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Wound-related factors

Wound infection

A wound infection can disrupt the delicate balance of micro-organisms in the wound prompting an immune response that causes inflammation and cell damage. Bacteria can also produce a chemical substance which can stop the wound healing cells from working.

Biofilm

Sometimes a wound may stay the same over time — it doesn't heal but it also doesn't have signs of infection. This may be because of a biofilm in the wound. A biofilm is a large number of bacteria that produce a protective cover that hides them from detection by the immune system.

Both infection and biofilm will need treating so seek advice from a healthcare professional if you suspect you might have one of these conditions.

Poor blood supply

Poor blood supply reduces the oxygen and nutrients that reach the wound, and also hinders the effective removal of waste products. If there is swelling present (oedema), this can have the same effect.

Dead wound tissue

The wound may contain dead cells or tissue that may have a black, brown or yellow appearance. This may need to be removed by a healthcare professional as it stops the wound from healing, can have an unpleasant smell and encourages infection.

Debris in the wound

There may be debris present in the wound, such as old dressing fibres, or gravel or glass from the initial injury. If you are worried this may be the case for your wound, contact your healthcare professional so that they can perform an assessment.

Pressure

Any trauma or pressure applied to the wound may restrict the blood supply to the skin in the corresponding area. In this situation, the main treatment is to remove the cause of trauma or pressure to prevent damage occurring.

Size and age of wound

Larger wounds may take longer to heal as there is a greater area of wound to cover. Older wounds may get stuck in a cycle of non-healing that it needs treatment to exit. In this situation a full assessment and a change in wound management may be needed.

How to help your wound to heal

The first step for you and your wound is a thorough assessment by a healthcare professional. This will help to identify what type of wound you have, what is likely to have caused it, and if you have any person or wound-related factors that might delay the healing of your wound or increase your risk of developing a wound in the future.

By identifying any risk factors you have, you can address as many as you can to help to improve your chances of wound healing.