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Patient information: Taking care of cuts and scrapes (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

Does my cut need stitches? — If your cut does not go all the way through the skin, it does not need stitches ([figure 1](#)). If your cut is wide, jagged, or does go all the way through the skin, you will most likely need stitches. If you are unsure if your cut needs stitches, check with your doctor or nurse.

This article discusses cuts and scrapes that do not need stitches. For information on stitches, see the following topic: [Patient information: Stitches \(The Basics\)](#).

How do I take care of a cut or scrape on my own? — To take care of your cut or scrape, follow these basic first aid guidelines:

- Clean the cut or scrape – Wash it well with soap and water. If there is dirt, glass, or another object in your cut that you can't get out after you wash it, call your doctor or nurse.
- Stop the bleeding – If your cut or scrape is bleeding, press a clean cloth or bandage firmly on the area for 20 minutes. You can also help slow the bleeding by holding the cut above the level of your heart. If the bleeding doesn't stop after 20 minutes, call your doctor or nurse.
- Put a thin layer of antibiotic ointment on the cut or scrape.
- Cover the cut or scrape with a bandage or gauze. Keep the bandage clean and dry. Change the bandage 1 to 2 times every day until your cut or scrape heals.
- Watch for signs that your cut or scrape is infected (see below).

Most cuts and scrapes heal on their own within 7 to 10 days. As your cut or scrape heals, a scab will form. Be sure to leave the scab alone and not pick at it.

When should I call the doctor or nurse? — Call the doctor or nurse if you have any signs of an infection. Signs of an infection include:

- Fever
- Redness, swelling, warmth, or increased pain around the cut or scrape
- Pus draining from the cut or scrape
- Red streaks on the skin around the cut or scrape

Cuts called “puncture wounds” have a higher chance of getting infected. A puncture wound is a type of cut that is made when a sharp object goes through the skin and into the tissue underneath.

Will I need a tetanus shot? — Maybe. It depends on how old you are and when your last tetanus shot was. Tetanus is a serious infection that can cause muscle stiffness and spasms. It is caused by bacteria (germs) that live in the dirt.

Most children get a tetanus vaccine as part of their routine check-ups. Vaccines are treatments (usually shots) that can prevent certain serious or deadly infections. Many adults also get a tetanus vaccine as part of their routine check-ups.

If your skin is cut, and especially if the cut is dirty or deep, ask your doctor or nurse if you need a tetanus shot.

More on this topic

[Patient information: Stitches \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Taking care of bruises \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Animal bites \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Animal bites \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

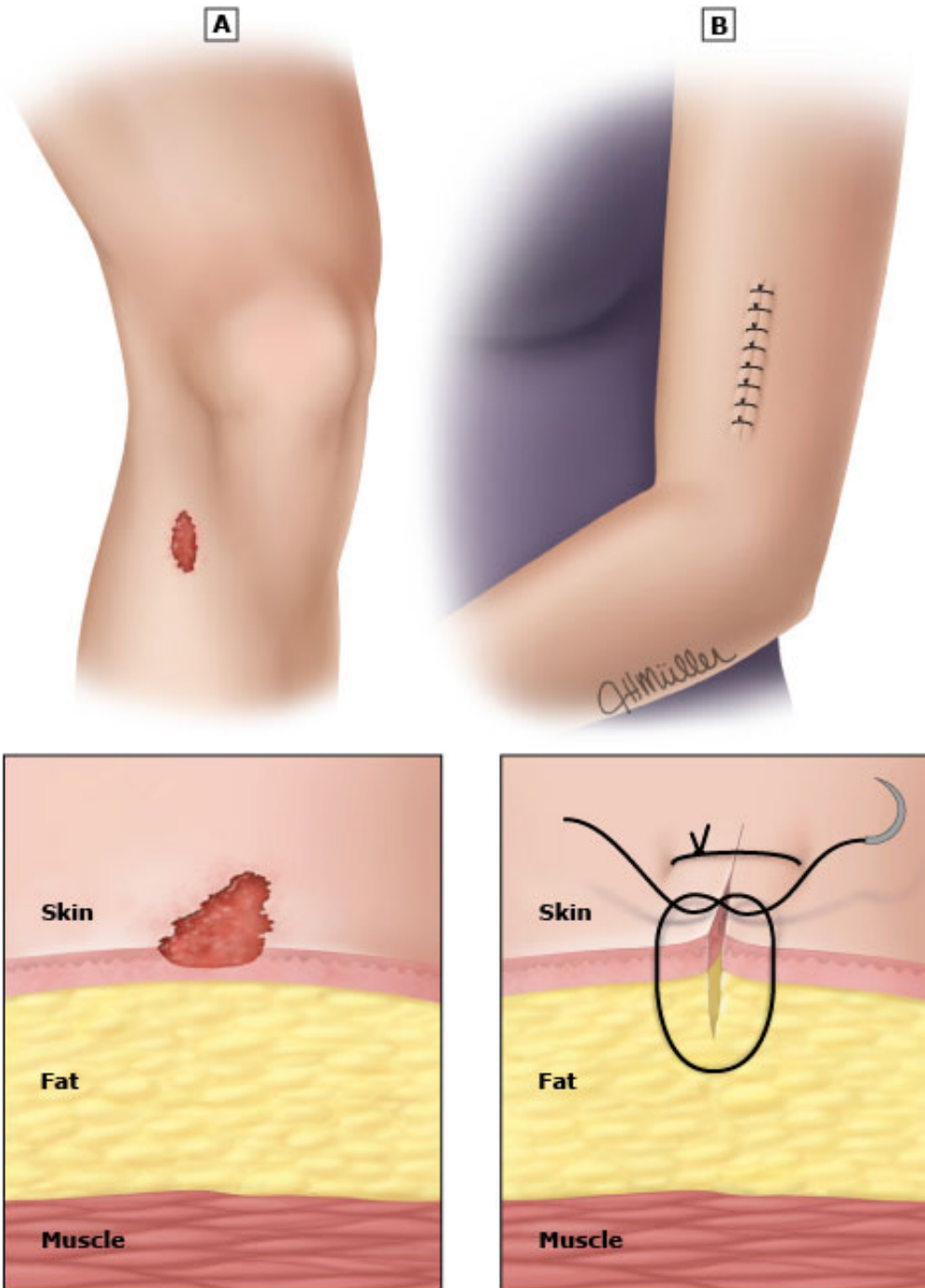
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GRAPHICS

Minor cuts and scrapes



Picture A shows a scrape (also called an "abrasion"). The scrape doesn't go all the way through the skin, so it does not need stitches. Picture B shows a cut that does go all the way through the skin. This cut is deep, so it needs stitches.