The ROYAL MARSDEN
NHS Foundation Trust

Patient information

Caring for vulval wounds at home

This factsheet is a practical guide on how to care for your surgical wounds once you have left hospital.

How to keep the area clean and dry
Step 1

- Using a jug of lukewarm water, slowly pour the contents over the wound area. You may need to repeat this a few times. Alternatively, you may use a shower head on medium setting while standing in the bath or the shower, or even while sitting on the toilet. Plastic shower connections are cheap and easily obtained.
- It is important to cleanse the wound area well a few times a day. Some women have more wide-ranging surgery which means that they may have stitches toward the back passage area or in the groin area that also need to be cleansed.
- Keeping the wound area clean and dry after using the toilet is important in order to prevent infection. If you are not at home, you can use a water-filled squeeze bottle and some clean gauze in your handbag for when you need to use public toilets.

Step 2

- Dry the area carefully using a hairdryer on a cool setting. If you prefer not to use a hairdryer, you may dab gently with clean, soft gauze (this can be bought from a chemist.) Avoid rubbing the area as this may cause discomfort and irritation. The area should be dry before you get dressed.
- When you are at home, try to expose the area to air as much as possible. This can be done by not wearing underwear for short periods of time or overnight.
- Change sanitary towels regularly to help the keep area clean and dry.
- If you do not feel confident or need help with cleansing, we can arrange a district nurse to help you care for your wound at home.

What to do if you have pain or discomfort

Take your painkillers as prescribed. If you are taking them and still have pain, contact your GP, specialist sister or ward for advice.

A soft cushion may be more comfortable while sitting, but you should avoid sitting for long periods of time. You may find that lying on your side with a pillow between your legs comfortable. Gentle exercise, for example walking, may be helpful. You may have received information on exercises to follow by your physiotherapist.

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What to avoid for the first six weeks following your surgery

- It is important to avoid becoming constipated after your surgery. Excessive straining may cause the wound to come apart. You may be given medication to make your stools soft to prevent constipation.
- Do not do any heavy lifting or strenuous physical exercise for four to six weeks after your surgery. Your physiotherapist or surgeon will be able to advise you about this.
- You may not be able to drive for four to six weeks after surgery. We advise that you check with your insurance company on the specifics around driving after major surgery. Again, your surgeon or physiotherapist will advise you prior to discharge home.
- Avoid tampons, douching equipment or sexual activity until the area has healed completely.
- Avoid nylon underwear and tight clothing as this increases warmth and can promote infection. We suggest loose clothing such as skirts, jogging pants and knee-high stockings.

In what circumstances should I contact the hospital? You should contact us if:

- Your wound has an offensive odour and/or discharge
- Your wound does not appear to be healing
- You have a temperature above 38°C and/or sweats and shivers
- You have offensive smelling urine
- You have pain/problems with passing urine
- Your wound is very painful and not eased by painkilling medication
- You have a swollen leg or legs.

Please do not hesitate to contact your local specialist nurse or the ward nurses on Wiltshaw ward for further advice if you have any concerns or problems.

Contact details

The Royal Marsden switchboard: 020 7352 8171

Clinical Nurse Specialists (Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm)
NHS patients: 020 7811 8578
Private patients: 020 7811 8578/ 07721 648 082

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Hotline: 020 8915 6899
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

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Resources for further information about vulval cancer

Macmillan Cancer Support
Macmillan Support Line: 0808 808 0000
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and can tell you about local cancer support groups and organisations near you. They have a large number of publications on cancer and its treatment. Practical issues of coping are also available, such as benefits and returning to work after treatment.

Macmillan helps patients, their families and friends cope with cancer. Trained cancer nurses provide information, emotional support and practical advice by phone and letter. Over 50 publications on cancer, its treatment and practical issues of coping are available.

Cancer Research UK
Freephone: 0808 800 4040 (to speak to a nurse)
Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Trained cancer nurses can give information and support relating to cancer and its treatments. Publications are available and their website has information on specific cancers as well as coping with the emotional, practical and physical effects of cancer.

The Eve Appeal
Freephone: 0808 802 0019 (to speak to a nurse)
Website: www.eveappeal.org.uk

The Eve Appeal is a charitable organisation aimed at making people aware of gynaecological cancers. It also provides support and information specifically on vulval cancer.

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