A guide for patients and carers about preventing skin tears

What is a skin tear?
A skin tear is a traumatic wound caused by shearing, friction and/or blunt force resulting in separation of skin layers. A skin tear can be partial-thickness (separation of the epidermis from the dermis) or full-thickness (separation of both the epidermis and dermis from underlying structures).

Skin tears happen when the skin is fragile. They are the most common wound type for older people and are usually preventable. Tears are usually on the arms and legs, including the back of the hands.

What causes skin tears?
Trauma
The majority of skin tears are caused as a result of trauma, where the skin is displaced but still retains a blood supply.

Friction and shearing force
Different layers of skin rubbing together.

Tight-fitting clothes
Making it difficult to dress and undress.

Tapes
Inappropriate removal of tape that has been applied directly to fragile skin.

Who gets skin tears?
- Elderly people with thin or fragile skin.
- People with visual impairment that may be more vulnerable to slips and falls.
- People with long-term conditions that affect their balance, perception of space or sensation.
- People with very dry and fragile skin.
- People with prolonged use of steroids, which causes the skin to thin.
- People with poor nutrition and hydration, which causes the skin to breakdown.
- People with cognitive impairment or dementia and involuntary movements.
- People with impaired mobility who may be dependent on others for care, such as bathing, transferring and positioning.

How will my skin tear be treated?
The main aims of treatment are to:
- stop any bleeding
- minimise pain and discomfort
- save as much of the skin tear as possible
- protect the surrounding skin
- prevent infection.

The healthcare professional will bring the edges of the tear together as much as they can. A soft silicone dressing will be applied and may be left covering your wound for up to seven days. The healthcare professional will regularly check for signs of infection, redness, heat, swelling and odour, as well as monitoring your pain levels and the fluid coming from the wound (exudate level).

If the skin flap or skin around the wound becomes dark, please seek medical attention immediately.
What can I do to help prevent a skin tear?

- Look after your skin.
- Use pH friendly soap.
- Pat your skin dry, rather than rubbing it.
- Apply creams and ointments as often as needed to stop your skin feeling dry or becoming flaky.
- Eat a healthy balanced diet and try to drink six to eight glasses of water a day.
- Observe your skin and report any concerns to your healthcare professional.

What about me and my environment?

- Protect fragile skin by wearing trousers and long sleeved clothing. Make sure it is not too tight.
- Wear comfortable shoes to prevent falls.
- Make sure you have good lighting and position small furniture to help avoid unnecessary bumps or knocks.
- Remove rugs and excessive furniture to reduce the risk of trips and falling.
- Keep your fingernails short to avoid scratching or damaging your skin.
- Avoid wearing jewellery that could snag the skin.
- Use a sliding sheet for repositioning in bed.
- If you have pets, especially cats, try not to let them scratch you.
- If you use a wheelchair, avoid catching your feet and legs on the foot rests.
- If you use a hoist, avoid catching your feet and legs when transferring.

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