

# SCAR MANAGEMENT

Patient Information



## Scar Management after surgery

### Your Guide to Smoothing the Path:

Undergoing hand surgery is a significant step towards restoring function and reducing pain. But as the initial healing progresses, the appearance and feel of your surgical scar can become a new concern. Will it be stiff? Raised? Noticeable? The good news is that **you have significant power to influence your scar's outcome through scar management techniques**. While every scar is unique and some factors like genetics play a role, consistent care starting early can make a remarkable difference in minimising discomfort and maximising the cosmetic and functional result.

### Why Scar Management Matters for Hands

Our hands are constantly visible and in use. Scars here can potentially cause:

1. **Stiffness:** Tight scars can restrict movement in fingers, thumb, or wrist joints.
2. **Tenderness/Pain:** Scars can remain sensitive or painful, especially when pressed.
3. **Thickening & Raised Appearance:** Scars can become hypertrophic or keloid (overgrown).
4. **Cosmetic Concerns:** Visible scarring can be bothersome.

Proactive management helps prevent these issues, promoting a scar that is flatter, softer, smoother, more flexible, and less noticeable.

## Essential Scar Management Techniques: A Timeline Approach

**Phase 1: Early Healing (0-2 Weeks Post-Op) - PROTECTION is Key**

- **Follow Surgeon's Instructions:** This is paramount. Adhere strictly to wound care, dressing changes, and restrictions on getting the wound wet.
- **Splinting/Immobilisation:** Your surgeon may use a splint or cast initially to protect the repair and allow initial healing. Keep it clean and dry.
- **Gentle Oedema (swelling) Control:** Elevate your hand above your heart as much as possible to reduce swelling, which puts tension on the healing incision.
- **Avoid Sun Exposure:** UV rays can permanently darken scars. Keep the incision covered completely.

## Phase 2: Scar Maturation Begins (Approx. 2-6 Weeks Post-Op) - Introducing MOISTURE & MOBILISATION

*(Once the incision is fully closed and stitches are out, as approved by your surgeon/OT)*

1. **Scar Massage:** This is fundamental!
  - **Purpose:** Breaks down scar tissue, improves blood flow, softens the scar, reduces sensitivity, prevents adhesion to underlying structures.
  - **How:** Wash hands. Use a **non-irritating moisturizer** (fragrance-free lotion, petroleum jelly, silicone gel). Using 1-2 fingers, apply firm (but not painful) pressure:
    - **Circular Motions:** Small circles directly on the scar.
    - **Vertical & Horizontal Strokes:** Along the length and width of the scar.
    - **Kneading:** Gently pinch and roll the scar between fingers.
  - **Frequency:** Start with 1-2 minutes, 2-3 times daily. Gradually increase to 3-5 minutes, 3-5 times daily as tolerated. Be consistent!
2. **Moisturisation:** Keep the scar supple. Apply your chosen moisturiser or silicone product (see below) generously throughout the day, especially after massage or washing hands.
3. **Silicone Products:** The gold-standard topical treatment.
  - **Sheets/Gels:** Applied directly to the scar. They hydrate, regulate collagen production, and flatten/soften the scar.
  - **Application:** Clean, dry skin. Wear for at least 12 hours/day, often overnight. Wash/reuse sheets daily. Gels dry clear.
4. **Gentle Range of Motion (ROM):** As directed by your surgeon and occupational therapist (OT), begin prescribed exercises to regain movement. Moving joints helps prevent the scar from tethering and restricting mobility.
5. **Vibration:** If your scar or the area around it is hypersensitive then vibration therapy may help to settle this. Get a disposable electric toothbrush and apply it gently to the area around the scar in circular movements starting away from the sensitive area and working towards it for 5-10 minutes twice a day.

## Phase 3: Long-Term Remodeling (Months 3-12+) - PRESSURE & PERSISTENCE

1. **Continued Massage & Moisturisation:** Keep massaging! This phase is crucial as the scar continues to remodel.
2. **Silicone:** Continue use as long as the scar appears active (red, raised, itchy).
3. **Pressure Therapy:**
  - **Purpose:** Flattens raised scars by limiting blood supply to excess tissue.

- **Methods:**

- **Custom Pressure Garments:** Often made by an OT, providing consistent, measured pressure. Essential for significant scarring.
- **Self-Adhesive Wraps (e.g., Coban):** Can be used for linear scars under guidance.
- **Silicone Pads with Pressure:** Combining silicone and pressure is very effective.

4. **Sun Protection (Absolute Must!):** Continue rigorous sun protection for *at least one year*. Use high-SPF (50+)broad-spectrum sunscreen or cover the scar with clothing/gloves whenever exposed. Sun damage is permanent.
5. **Progressive Exercises:** Continue OT exercises to maximise strength and function. Scar tissue needs regular, gentle stretching to remain flexible.

### **Red Flags - When to Contact Your Surgeon or OT:**

- Signs of infection (increasing redness, swelling, warmth, pus, fever).
- Sudden increase in pain.
- The wound re-opens.
- Significant loss of movement despite exercises.
- Severe, persistent itching or pain from the scar.
- Rapid, excessive thickening/redness of the scar.

### **Patience and Consistency are Your Best Tools**

Scar maturation takes time – often 12-18 months or longer. Don't get discouraged if progress seems slow. The techniques outlined here are most effective when started early and performed **faithfully every day**. Working closely with your surgeon and an occupational therapist specialising in hand therapy is invaluable. They can tailor a program specifically for your scar, your surgery, and your recovery goals.

By taking an active role in your scar management, you give yourself the best chance for a functional, comfortable, and aesthetically pleasing result, letting your hands get back to telling your story without the scar being the main character.