CONDITION

Scrape

A scrape is a shallow injury caused when friction rubs away the outer layers of skin.

WHAT IT IS
Superficial damage to the outer layers of skin

BODY SYSTEM
Skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Raw skin, soreness, mild bleeding, clear fluid

WHAT CAUSES IT
Friction or rough contact damaging the skin

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Visual and physical examination

MAIN TREATMENT
Cleaning, moist wound care, and protective dressings

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - skin usually heals with wound care

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - uncontrolled bleeding or major injury

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most scrapes heal without lasting problems

Overview

A scrape is a shallow skin injury caused when the skin rubs against a rough surface. The medical term is an abrasion. Common examples include grazing a knee on pavement, sliding on a sports surface, or rubbing skin against a rough edge.

A scrape usually damages the epidermis, which is the skin's outer protective layer. A deeper scrape may also reach the dermis, the layer underneath. Because many small blood vessels and nerve endings are close to the surface, even a shallow scrape can sting and look red or wet.

Most small scrapes can be cared for at home. Cleaning matters because dirt, gravel, glass, or other material may be pushed into the wound. A larger or contaminated scrape may need professional cleaning, a tetanus assessment, or treatment for infection.

A skin scrape is different from a corneal abrasion, which affects the clear surface of the eye. Eye pain, light sensitivity, or a change in vision needs prompt medical assessment.

Symptoms

The appearance of a scrape depends on its size, depth, and location. The injured area may look pink, red, or raw. It may bleed slightly or release a small amount of clear or pale-yellow fluid.

Pain is often burning or stinging. The area may feel tender when touched or when clothing moves across it. Mild swelling can develop around a recent injury.

As healing begins, the surface may become pink and form new skin. A scab can develop if the wound dries, although a scab is not required for healing.

Signs that are less typical of normal healing include increasing pain, spreading redness, warmth, pus, a bad smell, or fever. These may suggest infection, especially when they worsen instead of improving.

Causes and risk factors

A scrape happens when friction removes part of the skin's surface. Falls are a common cause, particularly on pavement, gravel, concrete, artificial turf, or rough ground. Cycling, skating, contact sports, and workplace accidents can cause broader injuries sometimes called road rash or friction burns.

Scrapes can also come from fingernails, rough clothing, carpets, plants, or repeated rubbing from footwear or equipment. An animal or human scratch may look like a simple scrape but can carry a higher risk of infection.

Certain circumstances can make complications or slow healing more likely:

These factors do not mean that infection will occur. They may mean the wound needs closer observation or earlier medical care.

- Dirt, gravel, or other material remains in the wound
- The scrape is large, deep, or repeatedly rubbed
- Blood flow to the area is poor
- Diabetes affects wound healing
- Medicines or health conditions weaken the immune system

- Tetanus vaccination is not up to date

Diagnosis

A scrape is usually diagnosed by looking at the skin and asking how the injury happened. No blood test or scan is needed for an uncomplicated surface injury.

A healthcare professional may check the wound's depth, blood supply, sensation, and ability to move the nearby joint or limb. They may also look for embedded dirt, glass, gravel, or other foreign material.

An X-ray or another imaging test may be considered when something could be hidden under the skin, the injury involved glass or metal, or there may be an associated broken bone. A wound sample is not routinely needed, but it may be taken if an infection is unusual, severe, or not responding as expected.

The assessment may include your tetanus vaccination history. Tetanus is a serious infection caused by bacteria entering a wound. The need for a booster or other preventive treatment is based on the wound and your vaccination record.

Treatment and management

For a small scrape, start by washing your hands. If the wound is bleeding, apply steady pressure with clean gauze or cloth. Avoid repeatedly lifting the material to check, because this can disturb clotting.

Rinse the scrape under clean running water. Gently wash around it with mild soap, taking care not to scrub damaged tissue. Visible grit can sometimes be removed with clean tweezers, but deeply embedded material should be assessed by a healthcare professional.

Hydrogen peroxide, rubbing alcohol, and strong iodine solutions can irritate tissue and may delay healing. Routine cleaning with water is usually less damaging.

After cleaning, a thin layer of plain petroleum jelly can help keep the surface moist. Cover the scrape with a sterile non-stick dressing. Change the dressing when it becomes wet or dirty, or as directed on the product. Avoid applying products that have previously caused a skin reaction.

A dressing protects the area from dirt and repeated friction. Moist, covered wound care can also reduce cracking and support new skin growth. Try not to pick at a scab or peel away healing skin.

Larger road-rash injuries may require pain control, thorough professional cleaning, and special dressings. Removing gravel is important because material left in the skin can cause ongoing inflammation or permanent dark marks.

Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are not automatically needed for every scrape. A clinician may recommend topical or oral antibiotics if there is an infection or a particular contamination risk. Treatment should be based on the wound rather than used routinely.

Complications

Infection is the main complication. Increasing pain, warmth, swelling, spreading redness, pus, or fever may be signs. Red streaks extending away from the wound can indicate that infection is spreading through nearby lymph vessels.

A deeper scrape may leave a scar or an area that is lighter or darker than the surrounding skin. Sun exposure can make a new dark mark more noticeable, so protecting healed skin from the sun may help it fade more evenly.

Gravel, dirt, or pigment trapped under the skin can create permanent discolouration sometimes called traumatic tattooing. Scrapes over joints may repeatedly split open with movement and take longer to heal.

Tetanus is uncommon where vaccination is widely available, but contaminated wounds can create a risk in someone who is not adequately protected. A scrape may also occur alongside a sprain, fracture, head injury, or deeper cut.

Prevention

Not every scrape can be prevented. Falls and accidental contact can happen even when you are careful.

Protective clothing and equipment can reduce skin contact with rough surfaces. Knee pads, elbow pads, gloves, suitable footwear, and long sleeves may help during skating, cycling, sports, gardening, or manual work. Equipment should fit properly so it does not cause repeated rubbing.

Keeping walking areas clear, using handrails, and improving lighting may reduce falls. Sports surfaces and work areas should be maintained when possible.

Staying up to date with routine tetanus vaccination does not prevent the scrape itself, but it helps protect against tetanus if the skin is broken.

Living with it and what to expect

A small, shallow scrape often becomes less painful over the first few days as new skin develops. Larger or deeper scrapes can remain tender and may take several weeks to close fully. Healing time is affected by the wound's size, location, cleanliness, and whether it is repeatedly rubbed or reopened.

New skin may look bright pink or red at first. It can feel sensitive, tight, or itchy. These changes usually settle gradually, although the colour may take months to blend with the surrounding skin.

Some scrapes leave a lasting mark, especially if they reach deeper skin layers, become infected, or contain embedded debris. Scarring cannot always be prevented. Protecting the healing area and avoiding picking may reduce further injury.

Most people return to usual activities as comfort allows. A dressing or protective clothing may be helpful if work, exercise, or sport would expose the area to dirt or friction. If movement keeps reopening a scrape over a joint, temporary activity changes may be needed.

When to get medical help

Seek emergency care if:

Do not pull out a deeply embedded object. It may be limiting bleeding and should be removed by a trained professional.

Seek prompt medical advice if the wound is large, very painful, on the face or near an eye, or cannot be cleaned properly. You should also get advice for a scrape caused by a human or animal bite or scratch.

Contact a healthcare professional if pain, redness, warmth, or swelling is increasing; pus or a bad smell develops; red streaks appear; or you have a fever or feel unwell.

Earlier assessment is sensible if you have diabetes, poor circulation, reduced sensation, or a weakened immune system. Ask about tetanus protection if the wound is dirty or your vaccination history is incomplete or uncertain.

Routine follow-up is appropriate if the scrape is not steadily healing, keeps reopening, or leaves persistent tenderness or embedded material after the immediate injury has settled.

- Bleeding is heavy, spurting, or does not stop with firm pressure
- The scrape followed a serious crash, fall, or crush injury

- Bone, muscle, or other deep tissue is visible
- There is major loss of feeling, movement, or blood flow
- An object is deeply embedded in the wound
- There are signs of a serious head, neck, chest, or abdominal injury

Common questions

How long does a scrape take to heal?

A small surface scrape may close within about a week. A larger or deeper injury can take several weeks. Infection, poor circulation, repeated rubbing, and debris in the wound can delay healing.

Should I let a scrape dry out?

Usually, no. A thin layer of petroleum jelly and a non-stick dressing can keep the wound slightly moist and protected. This supports healing and prevents the dressing from sticking to the raw surface.

Can I shower with a scrape?

Clean running water is generally safe and can help rinse the wound. Avoid soaking it in pools, hot tubs, lakes, or baths until the skin has closed, because soaking can soften the wound and expose it to germs. Replace a wet dressing afterward.

Why is my scrape leaking yellow fluid?

A small amount of thin, clear or pale-yellow fluid can be part of normal early healing. Thick cloudy fluid, pus, a bad smell, increasing pain, warmth, or spreading redness may indicate infection and should be assessed.

Will my scrape leave a scar?

Many shallow scrapes heal without a clear scar. Deeper injuries, infections, repeated picking, and embedded gravel make lasting marks more likely. New skin may remain pink, red, lighter, or darker for months even when a permanent scar does not form.

Do I need a tetanus shot for a scrape?

It depends on the wound and your vaccination history. Dirty or contaminated wounds may need different tetanus protection from clean, minor wounds. A healthcare professional or pharmacist can check whether your routine vaccinations provide enough protection.

Sources

- Cuts and grazes , NHS
- Clinical Guidance for Wound Management to Prevent Tetanus , US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Minimize a scar: Proper wound care tips from dermatologists , American Academy of Dermatology
- Cuts and puncture wounds , MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia, US National Library of Medicine
- Abrasions , Merck Manual Consumer Version