

Care of Surgical Incisions in Cats

The purpose of this handout is to provide you with general information about the routine care of your cat's surgical incision. If your cat's incision requires special care, your veterinarian will discuss the details of this care with you.

Are there different methods of closing a surgical incision?

Yes. If a surgical incision extends through several layers of tissue, each layer will be closed separately. Therefore, there may be multiple rows of sutures in a single incision site. The surface or skin layer of your cat's surgical incision may have been closed with surgical glue or with one of several different types of sutures and suture patterns. The suture pattern that is used to close the skin depends on the length of the incision and how much tension is present across the incision, or on the preference of the veterinary surgeon.

As long as there is minimal tension on the surgical incision, your cat's veterinarian will use regular suture material and a standard suture pattern. In these cases, the stitches may be placed on the skin surface using a non-absorbable suture material, or they may be buried beneath the skin surface using absorbable suture material. Some surgeons prefer to use surgical glue or stainless steel staples to close routine incisions.

If the surgical procedure involved removal of a large mass, repair of a large wound, or debridement (cutting away) of infected or dead tissue, the loss of tissue may mean that the surgical incision is under a lot of tension. Excessive tension across an incision line may cause the wound to gape open and will delay healing. To minimize the tension on the incision line, your veterinarian may have used a special tension-relieving suture pattern or a type of skin suture called a 'stent suture'. If the surgical site was contaminated or infected before surgery, a surgical drain may have been placed within the incision to drain away any infectious material.

Are the instructions for care of different types of surgical incisions the same?

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Under no circumstances should a cat with a fresh surgical incision be allowed to go outdoors. Restrict your cat's activity for a period of 7-14 days, to allow the incision to begin healing. Do not allow your cat to jump or engage in any strenuous activity that could cause excessive stretching of the surgical incision, especially in the first few days after the operation. Excessive activity may cause the stitches to break apart, or may cause the incision to start bleeding.

Your veterinarian may prescribe cage rest or confinement in a small room in certain circumstances.

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Do not bathe your cat or allow the incision to get wet. Never apply any cream, ointment, disinfectant or other substance to the incision unless specifically instructed to do so by your veterinarian. In particular, NEVER clean the incision with hydrogen peroxide or alcohol since these products will damage the cells and delay healing.

Do not allow your cat to lick or scratch at the incision, as there is a danger that the cat may pull out the stitches or may introduce an infection into the incision.

As long as the incision is not bandaged, inspect it at least twice daily. If a surgical drain was placed in the incision, you may be instructed to clean the drain several times per day.

What should the incision look like?

The incision should normally be clean and the edges should be touching each other. The skin should be a normal or slightly reddish-pink color. It is not unusual for the incision to become slightly redder during the first few days, as healing begins to take place.

In pale-skinned cats, bruising is often seen around the surgical site. This may not appear until a few days after the operation and in some cases can seem excessive in comparison to the size of the incision. This is due to seepage of blood under the skin edges and it is normal.

In some cases, a small amount of blood may seep intermittently from a fresh incision for up to twenty-four hours, especially if the animal is active.

When should I become concerned?

You should be concerned and should contact the hospital immediately if you see any of the following at the surgical site:

- Continuous dripping or seepage of blood or other fluids from the incision
- Intermittent blood seepage that continues for more than twenty-four hours.
- Any swellings, excessive redness of the skin, unpleasant smells or discharge.

What should I do if my cat is licking its wound or chewing the stitches?

In the first few days after surgery, your cat instinctively may try to clean the operation site by licking. The incision may become itchy as the wound heals and the fur begins to grow back in. Your cat may respond to this itchiness by licking or chewing. It is a misconception that cat's



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If your cat chews or licks excessively, there is a danger of the stitches being pulled out or of infection being introduced into the wound. If your cat persists in licking its incision, you may have to purchase an Elizabethan collar to prevent this behavior. Not surprisingly, many cats find these collars strange at first and will attempt to remove them. However, after a short period most pets will settle down and tolerate wearing the collar. It is better to keep the collar on all the time, rather than to take it on and off. It only takes a few seconds of chewing for a cat to undo its stitches or damage the surgery site. If your cat does succeed in removing any of its stitches then please call the hospital as soon as possible.

When do the stitches need removing?

If your cat's skin incision was closed with sutures that were buried beneath the skin surface, they do not require removal. If your cat's incision has non-dissolving skin stitches, stainless steel sutures, or stent sutures, they should usually be removed seven to fourteen days after the operation; the actual time depends on the type of surgery performed. Your veterinarian will tell you when the sutures can be removed from your cat.

When can my cat resume normal activities?

This will depend upon the type of operation your cat underwent. In the case of a minor procedure involving a small incision, some restriction of exercise should be maintained until a few days after the skin stitches are removed. However, if a major operation has been performed or a large incision is present, a longer period of convalescence will be required, which may involve keeping your cat housebound for a number of weeks. Your veterinarian will give you detailed instructions on how long you should restrict your cat's activities following surgery.

Is there any special advice that I need to follow to care for my cat's incision?

What follows below is a checklist of things that you may need to do, depending on your cat's particular case:

☐ Administer the prescribed medication(s) _____ as directed on the label.

☐ Clean the discharges that accumulate around the surgical drain at least twice daily.

☐ Bring your cat in for removal of the surgical drain in _____ days.

☐ Confine your cat to a crate for the next _____ days.

☐ Other _____

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