



Managing scarring in primary care

A resource to incorporate scarring advice and care into practice

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What is the extent of the psychological impact caused by scarring?

In an image-conscious society that places immense pressure on how we look, scars can cause some people to experience a loss of confidence and self-esteem. The psychological effects often vary depending on the location of the scar, how and why it occurred, as well as the age and sex of the person. These factors influence how patients feel and are key in directing how our emotions manifest.

For some, these concerns may have knock-on effects on other areas of their life and patients have reported negative impacts on forming relationships or receiving negative reactions from others.¹

A recent survey revealed that 9% of people with scarring feel that they are being judged by others, and 22% are often openly questioned about their scar.² Some experience feelings of isolation (9%) as a result of their scar, and the same percentage feel that their scar has become more visible than their true self.²

“It is often difficult for patients to be impartial about their scars and they may feel embarrassed, ashamed or socially inhibited as a result. They may feel that scars remind them that they are no longer who they used to be, or that other people judge them or see them differently because of a scar.”

Jo Hemmings, Behavioural Psychologist

What are the different types of scars?³

Helping patients to understand their scar type and offering explanations about the healing and scar maturation processes can offer reassurance and set expectations. Together with discussions around treatment options that can minimise scarring, healthcare professionals (HCPs) can better support patients living with scars.

Atrophic

Typically small and form indentations below the surface of the skin, for example surgical incision. Indented or depressed/sunken scars are also described as atrophic, for example like those from acne or chickenpox.



Hypertrophic

Take the form of red lumps, raised above the surface of the skin. They can continue to thicken for up to six months, can be itchy or painful, but remain within the boundaries of the original wound site.



Keloid

Raised scars that spread beyond the original area of skin damage may be minor or major. They continue to grow over time, and usually recur after excision.



42%

of people with scarring experience a negative impact on their mental health, including symptoms of depression and anxiety

Bio-Oil Survey 2016

Scar contractures

Develop when scars cross joints or skin creases at right angles, often as a result of burn injuries. They can cause tightening of the skin, and may cause discomfort or affect movement. If a patient is experiencing these symptoms, referral to a plastic surgeon should be discussed for scar revision.



Stretch marks (striae)

The result of the skin suddenly stretching. The dermis breaks in places, allowing the deeper layers to show through. Often occurring in a period of rapid weight gain, pregnancy or during growth spurts in puberty.⁴



Scar maturation process

Wound healing comprises several overlapping phases:

Haemostasis & inflammation

1. Blood rushes to the site of the wound to form clots.
2. Cells in the blood release chemicals, which cleanse the wound and prepare it for healing.

This stage lasts up to seven days.

Proliferation

3. Collagen and ground substances, the bricks and mortar of scar tissue, are laid down.
4. New capillaries are formed and the outer layer of the skin is healed.

This stage lasts approximately two weeks.

Maturation & remodelling scar formation

5. Collagen continues to build and fill in the area, creating the scar.
6. The scar covers and protects the site of the wound, though it can easily be disrupted.

This stage can take up to two years depending on the size and depth of the wound.

The resulting scar tissue often never attains the appearance or strength of the surrounding skin, and hair follicles and sweat glands at the scar site will not grow back.

Remember:

It can take up to two years to see the scar at its best so patients can be reassured that in most cases the scar will continue to improve.

If the scar isn't healing, particularly if it is red and itchy and becoming more pronounced, patients should be advised to see their doctor. It may be that the scar is being over-active and topical treatments may be needed to reduce this activity to help healing.

How can the appearance of scars be minimised?

Scars usually fade in colour over time, and while there is no treatment that can make a scar disappear entirely, there are various solutions, including preventative measures, used alone or as part of combination therapy, which offer an opportunity to improve the scar's appearance.⁵

Practical tips for self-care

Following a wound or procedure, there is a window of opportunity to help ensure a scar heals well. Factors such as bleeding, infection and wound opening up (dehiscence), as well as smoking, can delay the healing process. There are a number of measures patients can be advised to take to counteract these.

To minimise bleeding, patients can be advised to:

- ✓ Firmly apply a dressing and bandage.
- ✓ Apply pressure with a clean cloth or sterile gauze until bleeding stops.

To minimise infection, patients can be advised to:

- ✓ Keep any dressings on unless advised to remove them.
- ✓ Keep areas dry (damp dressings leave the area susceptible to infection).
- ✓ Wrap cling film over the treatment site when showering.
- ✓ If the wound is exposed, salt water bathing daily is helpful, ensuring the area is gently dried afterwards.

To minimise wound dehiscence, patients can be advised to:

- ✓ Take extra care before the stitches are removed.
- ✓ Avoid vigorous exercise.
- ✓ Avoid stretching the site.
- ✓ Apply micropore tape or steri-strips to the site to help strengthen the area.

Post-healing, patients can be advised to:

- ✓ Massage an oil or moisturiser into the scar daily in order to keep the scar hydrated and soften the scar tissue.
- ✓ Apply silicone gels or sheets to the scar.
- ✓ Wear a sun cream as sun exposure on new scars can cause pigmentation that can take time to settle.
- ✓ If desired by the patient, consult a trained camouflage practitioner to discuss camouflage options.

Medical intervention

Should further medical intervention be required for the treatment of a scar, the options below are available for consideration:

Corticosteroid injections

Surgery

Laser or light therapy

Pressure therapy

Aesthetic treatments, which wouldn't be available on the NHS include:

Dermal fillers

Skin needling

How to discuss scarring with patients

Despite the significant impact of scars on patients, survey data highlights that consultation between patients and HCPs on the topic of scarring are not reflective of the issue.

Over two thirds (67%) have never sought advice from a HCP for their scar, and almost half (47%) of patients are unsure of how best to look after their scars.²

When people do seek advice, they have a very positive experience, so we should encourage conversation.

More than half (58%) of those who have received advice felt it helped to improve the appearance of their scar.²

The survey also suggests that patients do value the input of HCPs in their journey towards accepting their scars. Of those surveyed, 37% would like to receive verbal advice from a HCP, and 23% would like to receive emotional support from a HCP.²

These insights demonstrate the need for the provision of patient education to encourage self-care for scars and ensure long-term acceptance.

What could stop a patient from bringing up the subject?

There are a number of reasons why patients may be reluctant to discuss their scarring with HCPs. Embarrassment was a key factor for 8% of patients and 25% weren't aware that a HCP could offer help with their scar management.²

How can HCPs broach the discussion with patients to ensure maximum sensitivity and comfort for the patient?

With 54% of patients reporting that they would only like advice from their HCP if they ask specifically, it's important to raise the subject in a sensitive and appropriate way.²

HCPs could simply add it to the end of a conversation about another topic. It's important to note the response from the patient and watch and listen to them to see if they seem keen to discuss their scarring or resistant. Some will not want to talk about it at all, especially if related to a highly traumatic incident. It is important to proceed gently, and empathetically, with reassuring questions

such us, 'I understand that you may not want to discuss this at the moment, so please just let me know'. Even a simple acknowledgement of a patient's scar may trigger something positive which patients will look into when they get home or at a later date.

What topics should HCPs cover?

It is important for HCPs to help patients with both the emotional and practical aspects of scarring, while also creating and managing realistic expectations.

HCPs may want to consider talking to patients about:

- How their scar will evolve and mature over time.
- Discuss how patients can best self-care to minimise the appearance of their scars, including massaging scars which may also help patients form an emotional connection – an important step in their journey of acceptance.
- Tools such as the Patient Observer Scale (POSAS) which HCPs may refer patients to for measuring scar reduction.⁶

47%
of patients are unsure
about how to care
for their scars

Bio-Oil Survey 2016

Helping you to deliver optimal care for patients with scarring

A survey conducted among 1,000 UK nurses confirms the need for greater education and resources on the management of patients with scarring following surgery or trauma.⁷

Despite demand from patients, nurses identified that a lack of knowledge and resources relating to scarring; including printed information, training, and resources to support advice giving, was hindering their potential to provide optimal advice and guidance to patients.⁷

Patients are also keen to understand more about their scarring, with 35% indicating that they would like to receive advice leaflets, and 41% wishing to receive advice about treatments or products that may help.²

Aims of optimal scar management:

- To assist in the wound healing process.
- To improve appearance and reduce disfigurement.
- To promote psychological acceptance of scarring.

To help HCPs discuss scarring with patients, Bio-Oil has collaborated with clinical experts to create two educational quick guides that can be used during consultations.

The SCAR guide

The SCAR guide is a succinct resource to work through with patients. This is a conversational tool based on the SCAR acronym - Site & skin, Category, Age and Reassure & recommend – that focuses on four elements required to manage scarring. HCPs can keep this guide to use as a reference during consultations with patients.



The infographic for the SCAR guide is enclosed in a thin black border. It features four vertically stacked items, each consisting of a 3D cube with a letter on its top face, followed by a bold heading and a descriptive paragraph. The letters are S, C, A, and R. At the bottom right of the infographic, the text 'Developed by Bio-Oil®' is displayed in orange.

S **SITE & SKIN TYPE**
Identify whether scar is on a mobility area and if the location of the scar or patient's skin type is likely to produce abnormal or worse scarring.

C **CATEGORY**
Is it a linear, keloid, hypertrophic, atrophic or contracture scar?


A **AGE**
Is the scar new, still maturing or fully matured?

R **REASSURE, RECOMMEND & REFER**
Help alleviate psychological worry by reassuring patient of commonness of scarring and that scars improve over time with the skin's natural regeneration process. Recommend treatment options and refer where necessary.

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The CARE guide

The CARE guide offers helpful tips on how to self-care, and can be provided to patients to take away with them. With the help of the CARE acronym – Connect & contact, Application, Regular, Expectation – patients are encouraged and empowered to continue managing their scar at home.



The infographic for the CARE guide is enclosed in a thin black border. It features four vertically stacked items, each consisting of a 3D cube with a letter on its top face, followed by a bold heading and a descriptive paragraph. The letters are C, A, R, and E. At the bottom right of the infographic, the text 'Developed by Bio-Oil®' is displayed in orange.

C.A.R.E. FOR YOUR SCAR

C **CONNECT & CONTACT**
Massaging your scar(s) twice a day can help to stimulate the repair process and help you connect with the scar emotionally.

A **APPLICATION**
Wait until your wound has fully healed and allow 4 weeks after any stitches have been removed before you start to apply Bio-Oil. To apply, massage in a small amount until it has been fully absorbed.

R **REGULAR**
You need to be dedicated and ensure you regularly massage and moisturise your scar twice a day for at least 3 months. This will help to speed up the skin's natural regeneration process.

E **EXPECTATION**
If you are in the care of a nurse or surgeon, ask them how long your scar(s) will take to heal and how you should expect it to look and feel as it heals. Alternatively your local pharmacist can help with advice and recommend useful websites for further information.

Developed by **Bio-Oil®**

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