

# Keeping Skin Healthy

*The body's best protection against infection and disease is its largest organ, the skin.*

Proper care of the skin is vital whether or not a person is an amputee. But for those who wear a prosthesis, thorough hygiene helps prevent disabling skin conditions and fosters a normal, active life.

The inescapable necessity of keeping the residual limb in a socket throughout the day presents its own set of potential problems. Confined in an airless chamber, the limb does not experience normal heat loss and retention patterns. Without air circulation, accumulated heat and trapped perspiration encourage fungal development and bacterial growth.

The combination of regular cleansing, using medicated soaps and anti-bacterial lotions, and changing into dry, clean prosthetic socks/liners as necessary, will protect the skin and keep it healthy.

## Clean Skin Is Basic

A daily cleansing of the residual limb should become as routine and second nature as teeth brushing and hair combing. Cleansing is best done at day's end since damp skin inserted in a socket is more likely to swell and become irritated.

Thoroughly wash the skin with warm water and a medicated lotion soap, using additional water to generate more lather. After the skin is completely cleaned, it should be fully rinsed, again in warm — not hot — water, since any remaining soap film contributes to skin irritation. Then towel dry gently, but completely.

After cleansing and drying, it is often advisable to apply a medicated skin lotion or cream to the entire residual limb. Keeping the skin supple helps it better withstand the extensive pressures exerted on it by wearing a prosthesis. Using a softening lotion on a regular basis also diminishes the formation of calluses, abrasions, and extreme toughening of the skin.

## Maintain Socket Hygiene

Just as it's important to keep skin clean and supple, it's equally necessary to wipe the interior of the prosthetic socket regularly. This is best done before going to bed so it can dry completely overnight.

Because of its design, the socket naturally harbors bacteria, fungi, and discarded skin tissue. However, the socket should never be submerged in water for cleaning. The inner surface of the socket and/or liner should be thoroughly wiped down with a cloth that has been lathered in medicated soap and warm water and then wrung out. A good scrubbing of the entire inside

surface should be followed by repeated wiping with the damp cloth well rinsed in clear water. Then the socket should be fully dried with absorbent towels and left to air dry overnight.

Make certain there is no soap residue or dampness before putting the socket back on since either will cause the skin to stick, rub, and become irritated. Special attention should be paid to above knee prostheses that include a suction valve. Warm, soapy water should be forced into and around the area of the valve, followed by a rinse with warm, clean water.

Daily socket washing is recommended, particularly if the residual limb perspires excessively in warm temperatures and humidity, and the person engages in vigorous activity. However, even people who lead a sedentary life should clean their prosthetic sockets daily.

## Care of Prosthetic Socks and Gel Liner

An important protective barrier which also needs to be kept clean is the prosthetic sock. This garment serves as a cushion between the skin and the socket wall and contributes greatly to a comfortable, functional prosthesis. However, since the sock or socks worn absorb perspiration, a daily change is vital to skin health and hygiene.

Follow manufacturers' instructions for laundering. In general, socks need a thorough cleansing in warm water, preferably using a sanitizing lotion soap or mild detergent. They should be well-rinsed in warm, clear water to remove any trace of soap residue which can irritate skin tissue. This is best done in the evening so the socks fully dry overnight or, preferably, over a period of several days.

When rinsing, excess water should be squeezed — not wrung — from the socks. If a prosthetic sock should dry in a distorted manner, use any hard, round object to reshape it. Sock drying forms are also available.

## Sheath Needs Washing, Too

The prosthetic sheath is an interface between the skin and the prosthetic sock. It should be changed and laundered daily.

Like the socket and prosthetic socks, the sheath should be lathered with a sanitizing lotion or mild detergent, using warm water. After a generous rinsing in warm, clear water, it should be squeezed, but not wrung out, and left to air dry completely. Most sheaths are manufactured from artificial fibers, indicating delicate handling. The material air dries quickly and should be ready to wear the following day.

Proper laundering will prolong the life of prosthetic socks and sheaths.

## Avoiding Skin Problems

People whose amputations are due to diabetes or other vascular insufficiencies have special skin care needs. These will be discussed in detail by the prosthetist. In other cases, consistent, thorough hygiene and a well-fitting prosthesis should keep skin supple and healthy. However, irritation or other problems are always a possibility. Keep clean prosthetic socks with you and change socks as often as necessary throughout the day. Closely monitor the appearance of skin and, if a sore or abnormal condition develops, notify your prosthetist and/or physician without delay.

## Care Guidelines

The following suggestions are only guidelines. Contact your prosthetist before a minor problem becomes a disabling situation.

**Abrasions** - Wash the area with warm water and a medicated lotion soap, patting dry gently. Apply a medicated skin cream and cover with a sterile gauze pad. If abrasions happen often, make certain the socket is fully dry before wearing. Should an abrasion show signs of infection, contact your doctor.

**Blisters** - Use the same treatment indicated for abrasions if the blister is minor and not painful. For more serious and frequently-recurring blisters, see your physician. Boils and abscesses should be treated by a doctor.

**Bacterial Infection** - Clean the area gently and thoroughly with a medicated lotion soap. Keep the site dry and let air circulate freely. If the condition persists, contact your doctor.

**Fungal Infection** - Wash with medicated lotion soap and dry well. Apply a medicated skin cream and expose the infection to air as much as possible. Avoid further infection by keeping the socket absolutely clean and fully dry before wearing it again. Consult your physician if problems persist.

## Call If In Doubt

It is always best to contact your prosthetist if concerns arise about skin condition or the care of any prosthetic equipment. Our staff is ready to answer your questions and eager to avert any problems before they interfere with the comfort and function that a custom-fabricated prosthesis was meant to provide. We're here to give you the best possible care, so don't hesitate to let us know how we may help.

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