

Your Scar After Heart Surgery

Tips from Adolescents and Young Adults



“It was the thing I was most worried about going in, but that I am happiest about now.”

What will my scar look like?

The size and shape of your scar will be unique to you, depending on what surgery you had and how you heal. There are many different types of scars, depending on the surgery or procedure. Some are very small, like the pin-sized scars from a catheter-based procedure. Midline chest scars running down the middle of the chest are from open-heart surgery. Thoracic scars are also from an open-heart surgery, but only done on infants and are on the side of the chest. Pacemaker scars are on the upper chest or abdomen.

In the beginning the scar will look like a long scab and will be covered by a layer of clear surgical glue (called Dermabond) to keep it safe from infection. This glue will peel off by itself. Remember, it is best not to pick at it. The scab will slowly heal and begin to look more like a scar over the first two months. However, that is not the end of the scar’s healing process. It takes about a year for the scar to go through all its different stages of healing, so it takes a while to know what it is going to look like.

Slowly, the scar will become less bright pink and it will look more like a skin-colored scar. While it might seem thicker than you imagined, it will slowly narrow and become less noticeable. However, every scar heals differently in ways that are unique to you. Your heart center healthcare team can answer questions you have about your scar.



“I survived a high-risk surgery to correct my life-threatening heart defect, and my scar is proof of that.”

Will my scar always be there?

Your scar may fade over time, but will always be there. However, after about a year, it will likely be quite thin and blend in with your skin tone. Some people describe being so used to their scar that they can even forget about it altogether.

How should I care for my scar?

There are a few key things that you can focus on when caring for your scar:

1. For the first 3 to 4 weeks after surgery, don’t apply any lotions or other products to your scar because it can cause infection.
2. Do not let your scar get sunburned at all during the first 12 months after surgery. This means applying and frequently re-applying a strong sunscreen that is greater than SPF40 every time you are in the sun. (You have to avoid the sun for the first 3 to 4 weeks, since it is not safe to use any kind of lotion, including sunscreen.) It is also a good idea to keep a shirt on as much as possible, just for the extra sun protection. If a scar gets sunburned, it will remain pinker and brighter than the rest of your skin tone and the scar will not blend in as well. This is less of an issue more than 12 months after surgery, although it is always a good idea to wear sunscreen.

3. It is very important to keep the scar clean and dry for the first 2 months after surgery. This is when infections are most common. Do not apply any special cleaning solutions other than soap and water. You should take only showers for at least the first 2 weeks after surgery (no baths). Also, although it might be tempting, do not pick at the Dermabond glue on the scar. Allow the glue to flake off on its own. This is important to help prevent infection. Signs of infection include swelling, draining fluid, spreading redness (moving away from the scar like ripples move in a pond), or areas where the wound looks to be coming apart.
4. If the scar is in the middle of your chest, adolescent and young adult females should wear a sports bra as much as possible after surgery to help support the wound healing. Without the support of a sports bra, the weight from your breasts can slowly pull the wound apart in tiny ways that can prevent good wound healing. Ultimately, this may make the scar more noticeable. Avoid bras with an underwire, as these may rub the scar and interrupt healing.
5. While some people like to use vitamin E or other medicines to help their scar heal, none have actually proven to be particularly helpful. Most scars heal in a way that is unique to their body. The best thing you can do is to avoid infections, sunburns, and keep your scar well protected while it is healing.

How do others feel about their scar?

Whether you are enjoying a summer day at the beach or wearing a low-cut shirt, your scar will often be visible to others. Sometimes this causes people to stare or question the history of your scar, but your scar will not be frightening or gross. Over time you will consider your scar a part of you, just like your eye color or your smile. Even though it might seem impossible early on, you will have the pleasure of sometimes forgetting about your scar altogether.



“I have scars all over my chest: on my side under my armpit from my very first surgery, right down the middle of my chest, one in my abdomen from my pacemaker surgeries, and a bunch of very small circular ones. However, I always forget they are even there. When someone asks what they are from, it is really entertaining to try and convince them of some outrageous story (such as a shark attack), but then I tell them the truth and they are even more surprised. Despite the mixed feelings I get in return, I enjoy telling my story because my scars are part of what makes me unique. Plus, the chicks dig them.”
-Brady, age 18

“My scar is beautiful, and yours will be too! I love my scar and could not imagine myself without it. It was the thing I was most worried about going in, but that I am happiest about now.”

-Kelsey, age 17

To Learn More

- Heart Center
206-987-2015
- Your healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

“My scar has been part of my body since I can remember and I am proud to show it. It is exciting for me to share my surgery story so when people notice my scar I jump at the opportunity to talk about it. I survived a high-risk surgery to correct my life-threatening heart defect, and my scar is proof of that. It is part of my identity.”

-Lisa, age 21

“Ohhh, the scar. I have a 12-inch mid-line scar down the middle of my chest, and I absolutely love it. I’ve had one ever since I was a baby, but with my more recent surgery in 7th grade it became thicker and more noticeable. Even as a high school girl, I am proud of it. As you get into those high school years, sadly, looks are a big concern. However, to have proof of the amazing obstacles that you have been through is pretty rewarding. If you’re worried about what other people think...remember, ‘Those who matter don’t mind, and those who mind don’t matter’.”

-Raegan, age 17

“My scar is definitely a part of me. It represents so many different things to me, like a sense of pride and thankfulness for what I’ve gone through and that I’ve survived it. But at times, it can also make me feel self-conscious and awkward. Sometimes I just want to be an average girl and to be noticed for something other than a huge scar down the middle of my chest. It is usually the very first thing people zero in on. I don’t really mind telling my story, but there are times when I just don’t feel like having that spotlight on me. I’ve gotten more used to it through the years. When I’m feeling annoyed or self-conscious about it, I tell myself that my scar is a part of me, but not who I am.”

-Krissy, age 23