

Management of Fungating Wounds

What are fungating wounds?

A fungating wound is a rare type of skin problem that occurs when cancer breaks through the skin and creates an open wound or ulceration with necrosis (dying tissue).

These wounds may also be called a malignant or fungating wound or lesion. They often have a bad smell and a lot of drainage. This kind of wound can happen with many types of cancer, including breast cancer, melanoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and especially with advanced cancer.

Care of Fungating Wounds

- Talk to your health care team about the care of your wound. The goal is not to heal the wound. The care is focused on managing symptoms such as bleeding, odor, drainage and pain.
- **What does a fungating wound commonly look like?** These wounds may start as raised bumps on the skin. The color may be pink or purple at first. Over time as the cancer grows the skin begins to break. It may start to form a large hole or begin to look like a cauliflower. The wound then can have many colors and drainage. It can be purple, red, yellow or even black.
- **Why does the wound have a bad smell?** The smell from this type of wound is due to bacteria that grows on the tissue of the wound and the necrotic (dying) tissue itself. It is important to talk to your health care team if you have problems with odor. There are many ways to help manage both the odor and the drainage.
- **Can this type of wound get infected?** These wounds can get infected if not taken care of properly. If the wound becomes infected antibiotics may be needed along with changes in the way you care for this wound.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

How to Clean a Fungating Wound

Cleaning is important for any wound. Your health care team will tell you how to care for your wound based on its location and problems it is causing. You should clean these wounds very gently to prevent bleeding or pain. You may find it helpful to use the shower to gently clean the wound with lots of warm water. If you are unable to shower, the wound may be cleansed by rinsing with 0.9% normal saline or warm tap water. It is important to dry the skin around the wound after cleaning the area.

Below are ways to help manage the odor, bleeding, drainage, or skin irritation that can happen with this type of wound. Talk with your health care team about which treatments are best for you.

How to Manage Odor

- Your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic called metronidazole to be put on the wound. This medicine can help decrease or get rid of the odor caused by the wounds. Metronidazole comes in a gel or powder that can be put directly on the wound or mixed with water or saline and then put on the wound.
- An antiseptic solution made with bleach called “Dakin’s solution” may be prescribed to help clean the wound or to use with gauze dressings. This may also help decrease the odor.
- Silver dressings may be prescribed to use on a wound. Silver is an antimicrobial agent used in different types of dressings and may help decrease odor. **Do not let Silver dressings come in contact with the Dakin’s solution.** This will cause the solution to not work properly.
- Medical grade honey or dressings with medical grade honey may be prescribed to help decrease odor.
- You can also reduce odor in the rooms where you spend most of your time, by putting coffee grounds or cat litter in containers around the room or using aromatherapy.

How to Manage Bleeding

Bleeding is a serious problem because fungating wounds can bleed easily.

- To prevent bleeding, it is important to be very gentle when cleaning the wound and doing dressing changes. Dressings should always be moistened or wet before being removed and if any part is stuck to the wound.

- Special dressings may be prescribed to help prevent them from sticking to the wound. These dressings are called low-adherent or non-adherent dressings. These dressings (Xeroform gauze or Adaptic gauze) have a greasy substance inside.
- If the wound starts to bleed, put pressure on it for 10 to 15 minutes to help stop the bleeding.

How to Manage Drainage

Fungating tumors usually have large amounts of drainage. If you have this problem, there are many ways to manage the drainage and protect your clothing and bedding.

- Extra absorbent dressings, such as foam dressings like SoftSorb and ABD pads, can be used.
- If dressings do not absorb well, are not large enough, or cost too much, you may use items such as baby diapers or feminine pads to help control drainage.

How to Manage Skin Around the Wound

Several things may cause skin irritation or discomfort around the wound. These include drainage, itching, tape use, or radiation therapy. Below are some ways to help manage this problem:

- The skin around the wound should be cleaned and dried at least once a day. Protective ointments such as Aquaphor may be put on as needed.
- If tape is irritating your skin, see if the dressing will stay in place without using tape. Depending on where your wound is located, elastic netting, surgical bras, ACE bandages, or other loose elastic items may be used to hold the dressings in place.

When to go the Emergency Department

If bleeding is heavy or does not stop with pressure you should go to the emergency room.