

**SUTURE REMOVAL**



*“Britannia between Scylla & Charybdis or The Vessel of the Constitution steered clear of the Rock of Democracy and the Whirlpool of Arbitrary-Power”; hand coloured etching, James Gillray, Published by H. Humphrey N. 18 Old Bond Street London, April 8th, 1793.*

*According to ancient Greek mythology, Scylla was a beautiful sea nymph, with whom Glaucus a minor sea god had fallen in love with, but she fled from him to the land where he could not follow. Glaucus appealed to the powerful sorceress Circe, to provide him with a love potion that would melt Scylla’s heart. Circe however fell in love with Glaucus, making shameless advances to him, which he rejected because he was in love with Scylla. Circe became enraged and took out her anger, not on Glaucus but on the*

*unfortunate Scylla. She prepared a vial of a potion with a powerful evil contained within it and poured it into the pool where Scylla would bathe. When Scylla entered the pool she was instantly transformed into a hideous six headed monster. She was transfixed by misery and bitterness and would spend her day on a rock in the sea grabbing and eating any hapless sailors who happened to pass near. Again according to ancient Greek mythology, Charybdis was once the nymph daughter of Poseidon and Gaia. She flooded the land to expand the realm of her father's kingdom, but this angered Zeus who turned her into a monster of the deep. She lived in a deep underwater cave on one side of the Strait of Messina, just opposite the monster Scylla. There she would suck vast amounts of water in and out of her mouth, creating a seething and treacherous whirlpool that would draw into the depths any ship that ventured too close.*

*The legends of Scylla and Charybdis are very ancient. We see them in Homer's Odyssey, when Ulysses, is forced to steer his ship through the treacherous Strait of Messina. He is faced with a most terrible choice, either he risks his entire crew by steering too close to the whirlpool, or otherwise he faces the certain loss of six of his crew if he sails too close to the six headed monster. He decides to sacrifice six of his crew rather than risk the entire ship. The legend possibly dates from the earliest sea going adventures of Greeks who first sailed the treacherous strait. It became firmly fixed in the cultural psyche of the West, in the form of the saying, "caught between a rock a hard place"; meaning a difficult decision had to be made between two equally bad alternatives. The saying was popularized into the public consciousness by the brilliant Eighteenth century political satirist James Gillray during the bloody height of the French Revolution. America had become "democratic" by 1783, and the French had followed suit by 1793 - though in an even more violent manner, which created serious alarm just across the channel in Britain, where anti-royalist popular sentiment was also seething. The British Prime Minister, William Pitt, the Younger, was trying to steer a desperate path between the "rock of Democracy" (read popular revolution) and "arbitrary autocracy", (read the British crown). There was serious concern in Britain among the ruling classes of the time of a popular revolution breaking out in Britain just as it had done so in America and France.*

*In Gillray's satirical print we see Pitt attempting to navigate his fragile boat, ("The Constitution"), which carries a buxom Britannia throwing up her arms in alarm, between the terrifying obstacles of Scylla, the six headed monster on the left and the raging whirlpool of Charybdis, on the right, in the form of a drowning inverted crown. The rock where Scylla dwells, shows a French Bonnet Rouge, symbol of the detested sans-culottes, while the whirlpool symbolizes the arbitrary autocracy of the British crown. Pitt desperately tries to steer towards the safety of an island lying within calm waters in the distance. On this island is a castle, bearing a mast showing the flag of the "Haven of Public Happiness". If things were not perilous enough, we also see in hot pursuit three sharks, or "the dogs of Scylla", bearing the unmistakable faces of his most bitter political opponents, Sheridan, Fox, and Priestley. They lie in wait for his slightest faltering.*

*When deciding the optimal timing of the removal of sutures, we are faced with two difficult alternatives. By too early a removal we risk a wound dehiscence, but by too late a removal we risk worsening of scar formation. We must steer a perilous passage between the "rock of Scylla" and the hard place of the "whirlpool of Charybdis". The most important guide to the optimal timing will be the anatomical location of the wound.*

## SUTURE REMOVAL

### Introduction

The optimal timing of skin suture removal is a balance between the risk of scarring and the risk of wound dehiscence.

The anatomical site of the skin wound is an important determinant in planning the optimal timing of suture removal.

### Optimal Timing

All percutaneous stitches will result in some degree of needle scarring if left in situ longer than **8 days** as epithelium will migrate down the needle track.

By the same token removal that occurs too early risks wound dehiscence.

It is important to minimize scarring to certain areas in particular, such as the face.

Where a good blood supply exists, (such as the face), sutures can be removed earlier than 8 days

*The following table gives a guide to the optimal timing of skin suture removal according to anatomical location of the wound:*

<b>Anatomical location</b>	<b>Days to suture removal</b>
<b>Scalp</b>	<b>6-8 days</b>
<b>Face (including ears)</b>	<b>5 days</b>
<b>Chest/ abdomen</b>	<b>8-10 days</b>
<b>Back</b>	<b>12-14 days</b>
<b>Limbs (arms or legs) *</b>	<b>8-10 days</b>
<b>Hand *</b>	<b>8-10 days</b>

<b>Fingertip</b>	<b>10-12 days</b>
<b>Foot</b>	<b>12-14 days</b>

\* Note that 2-3 days should be added for hand or limb lacerations that cross extensor surfaces of joints and if early motion is required for optimal rehabilitation.

#### *Skin adhesive tapes:*

If skin adhesive tapes were used for wound closure, these should be left in situ for at least **10 days** - or until they fall off themselves, provided the skin does not become sensitive to the adhesive substance, as evidenced by erythema or bulla formation.

#### **Technique**

In order to avoid tissue trauma with possible consequent further scarring, stitches should be cut at the knots with iris scissors.

There should be gentle washing with saline prior to stitch removal in order to remove any wound eschar.

Many so-called “suture scissors” are in fact too large for the task!

#### *Wound suppuration:*

If wound becomes infected, then sutures may need to be removed, either partly or completely to allow for drainage of pus.

#### *Wound tapes:*

Inelastic paper tapes can be used to help support a wound and help stop scar stretching in the period following suture removal.

Wound collagen does not reach full maturation and strength until 3 months.

References

1. Waller R, Tan G. Wound Care and Repair, in Cameron et al. "Textbook of Adult Emergency Medicine", Churchill-Livingston 4th ed 2015.

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