

Road Rash

This most common of bicycling injuries can be treated in different ways. The right way reduces healing time and scarring, and allows you to return to your bike promptly.



CYCLE HANDOUT

Prevention

Learn bike handling skills to help prevent falling. Ride defensively, especially in traffic and around squirrely riders. Always wear a helmet.

Treatment Objectives

The objective of treatment is to heal the tissues as rapidly and effectively as possible. The goals of therapy include preventing further damage to the skin and not allowing the depth of the rash to increase in severity.

What can go wrong? The rash can heal with scarring. The rash can take longer to heal than needed, because of infection, for example. Or the rash can heal well, but be more painful than necessary during the healing process.

Grading Road Rash

The severity of road rash is similar to that of burns. Rash can be

First degree. Only the surface is reddened. This problem does not require active treatment.

Second degree. The surface layer of the skin is broken, but a deep layer remains that will allow the skin to replace itself and heal without significant scarring.

Third degree. The skin is entirely removed, perhaps with exposure of underlying layers of fat and other supporting tissue structures. Such damage may require skin grafting and is beyond the scope of this book. Seek immediate medical attention.

Old-Style Treatment

There are two general methods of treatment for second-degree road rash. The first is the traditional “let nature take its course” approach, which is also called the open method. This involves cleaning the wound with soap and water, hydrogen peroxide, an iodide, or something similar, and then allowing the wound to dry out, form a scab, and “heal on its own.”

This method has its drawbacks for all but the most superficial, small road rashes. Just because you clean it once, doesn’t mean it won’t get infected. Bacteria thrive on damaged skin. Infection can deepen the depth of the rash, meaning that scarring and delayed healing are more likely. Scabs can crack and become painful. Scabbed areas don’t receive oxygen well from the surrounding air, and so take much longer to heal.

Modern Thinking—Cover It

The alternative is the closed approach: frequent cleansings and the application of topical antibiotics and dressings that keep the road rash moist and prevent scab formation.

The area is initially cleansed at least daily with wet compresses or bathing. Second or third degree road rash is weepy for several days: Moisture-barrier coverings may need an edge lifted several times a day to allow drainage.

Superficial debris is gently removed. An effort is made to remove soft-forming exudates (the beginnings of scabs) with gentle scrubbing. These exudates usually form between the third and fifth days after injury.

Pink, healthy, new-forming skin is what you want to see. Second-degree road rash usually takes 2 to 3 weeks to heal.

Modern-Thinking Supplies

Silver sulfadiazine (Silvadene) or mupirocin (Bactroban) is applied. A Vaseline gauze (e.g., Adaptic) is placed over this. This is a non-stick mesh that allows removal of the dressing without sticking. Padding in the form of gauze squares may be applied. Then, a conforming gauze roll is wrapped around the area and taped in place. Finally, a tube stretch gauze (e.g., Tubigauze) is applied over this to keep everything in place and tidy.

Continued

Alternatively, Tegaderm (3M) or Bioclusive (Johnson and Johnson) alone may be stretched over the antibiotic. The result is a dressing that allows maximum protection of the wound, minimum risk of infection, prevention of scabbing and its attendant cracking and pain, and fast healing.

Side Effects

Persons allergic to sulfa drugs should avoid sulfadiazine. Mupirocin is an alternative that is a little better at controlling skin infections, but it's more expensive. Neosporin or Polysporin is more likely to irritate the skin than sulfadiazine or mupirocin, but is available over the counter.

Watch for Sunburn on Road Rash

As the skin nears complete healing you may be tempted to allow your technique to become lax. Exposure to sun may cause the skin to remain permanently darkened after healing. Be sure to keep your rash covered until it has completely healed. Use adequate (SPF >18) sunscreen.

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