

## How to Make an Unsightly Scar Look Better

Whether you've got an old acne scar or a new stretch mark, there are ways to make a scar less noticeable. Here's how.

By Colleen Sullivan

Scars happen! Your cat's claw inadvertently grazes your face, a kitchen knife slips through your fingers, a fall on some rough gravel does a number to your knee, or maybe a few stretch marks have popped up. Unfortunately, despite what you may have heard, a scar can never completely go away. "Although the body attempts to heal by forming new collagen fibers, these fibers are not restored in the same manner as in normal skin. Instead, they're aligned in such a way to give rise to a scar," says [Kristina Goldenberg, MD](#), a New York City-based dermatologist.

But that doesn't mean you can't improve its appearance with a little time and TLC. "As part of wound healing, new blood vessels develop within the scars to effectively deliver oxygen and nutrients to the scar tissue. This is what gives a scar its red appearance," says Joshua Zeichner, MD, director of cosmetic and clinical research, department of dermatology at The Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. "This redness will go away on its own, usually within two years. After injury, some patients, particularly those with darker skin tones, may develop post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, essentially a stain in the skin rather than a true scar. This pigmentation will also go away on its own within a few years but in some cases, lightening creams or in-office procedures may be needed to lighten the dark areas."

Here, top derms share skin-saving tips that will help you treat your wounds well enough to prevent scars in the first place, plus how to minimize ones that have already formed.

### 1 Address the Wound Quickly.

Clean a cut immediately with water to physically remove any bacteria and debris. Then keep it moist. "Apply a thin layer of petroleum jelly, like Vaseline or Aquaphor to the wound," says Dina Strachan, MD, a New York City-based dermatologist. Some people like to use topical antibiotics, however derms usually advise against them, because there's a high incidence of allergic contact dermatitis to these products, which can worsen the scar. If a cut is deep, see a doctor to make sure you don't require stitches.



Photo by PhotoAlto/Frederic Cirou/Getty Images

# 2

## Cover the Cut.

“Wounds heal a bit slower, however significantly better, if they’re covered from the beginning,” says Zeichner. “Providing an occlusive barrier over the skin lowers the oxygen concentration at the surface of the wound, allowing new skin cells to migrate into the area for optimal and healing.”

# 3

## Leave the Wound Alone.

Some people think massaging a wound can prevent a scar. “But there is no evidence that manipulation of the skin will improve the appearance of a scar,” notes Goldenberg. “In fact, rigorous massaging may actually interfere with the natural process of healing and cause further trauma, worsening the appearance of the scar.”

# 4

## Consider an Over-the-counter Scar Minimizer.

Pharmacy shelves are filled with over-the-counter products that promise to eliminate scars. “Most will likely have very little effect, with one possible exception,” says Goldenberg. “Some studies show there’s an advantage to using silicone-based gel sheets, which help with healing by keeping the wound moist, protecting it from infection, and promoting healthy collagen production. But it’s important to start using them soon after any trauma has occurred.”

# 5

## Apply a Natural Remedy.

Cocoa butter, lemon juice, vitamin E, aloe vera, coconut oil, cucumber, olive oil, honey, potato slices, sugar scrubs, onion extract—these are just a few of the natural scar remedies that promise to minimize scarring. Do they work? “There’s no definitive clinical scientific research showing any of these ingredients promote less scarring,” says Zeichner. “But most of these ingredients will hydrate and protect your skin after a new wound has developed, and the earlier you can promote a healthy environment for wound healing, the better the skin can heal itself and the better a scar will look.”

# 6

## Try a Fading Cream.

“Ingredients like hydroquinone, vitamin C, kojic acid, retinol, and berry extract can lighten pigmentation on the surface of the skin associated with the scar, but they won’t address the scar itself,” says Zeichner. Some, though, can help with wound healing: retinol, for example, promotes cell turnover, reduces inflammation, and stimulates healthy production of collagen while vitamin C and berry extract can fight off free radicals. “All of these ingredients can be more effective when used as part of a combination approach to improving the appearance of a scar,” adds Zeichner.

## 7 Cover Up With Sunscreen.

“The skin around a scar is usually weaker than normal skin and is therefore predisposed to burns from sunlight, which can further worsen a scar’s appearance,” notes [Goldenberg](#). Sunlight can also increase the risk of post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, a darkening of the skin caused by an increase in melanin. Keep the area covered by applying a sunscreen with SPF 50+ at all times (La Roche-Posay Anthelios 50 Mineral Ultra Light Sunscreen Fluid comes in tinted and non-tinted formulas, \$24, [amazon.com](#); Shiseido’s Ultimate Sun Protection Lotion Broad Spectrum SPF 50+ is water-resistant, \$38.50, [amazon.com](#)).

## 8 Disguise a Scar With Makeup.

For facial scarring, look for a cream-based concealer that matches your skin tone, not the color of the scar. “Scars can be all different colors, but to conceal them you’ll want to blend them into your skin tone,” says New York City-based makeup artist Rachel Short. “Because the texture of a scar can vary, it’s best to warm up the concealer between your thumb and your ring finger, then gently tap it onto the scar, blending the edges into the surrounding skin for a seamless look.” For larger scars, like stretch marks on the stomach, try a hydrating liquid body makeup, which absorbs well into the skin (Dermablend Leg & Body Makeup, \$33, [ulta.com](#)). Using a blending sponge, tap the liquid over the scar, adding more product as necessary. Lock it in with a setting powder to avoid smudging and any product transferring onto your clothes.

## 9 Research In-office Treatments to Help Minimize Scars.

All of following procedures can help reduce the look of a scar, but you might want to wait six months before doing anything. “Giving a scar the chance to fade on its own first will allow for the most optimal results,” says [Goldenberg](#).

### Best for: Acne Scars

Punch grafts are basically small cookie cutters that cut out the scar tissue and replace it with healthy skin of the same size taken from an adjacent area. The new graft is stitched into place where there previously was a scar.

### Best for: Indented or Wide Scars

Excisions involve removing the skin around a scar and then closing it with stitches to create a linear line. The new scar heals in a straight line without any thickness.

### Best for: Any Type of Scar

Lasers such as Fraxel and CO2 stimulate healthy collagen production by punching microscopic holes or channels into the skin. By creating a controlled wound, the laser takes advantage of the skin’s ability to heal itself in a more cosmetically appealing way.

### Best for: Itchy Scars

Cordran tape is a topical steroid in a tape formulation that helps soften and flatten scars and reduce itch and thickness.

**Best for: Depressed or Acne Scars**

Fillers like collagen and Bellafill are often used for acne scars that appear as craters in the skin. The filler replaces lost tissue by raising indentations and minimizing the appearance of scars.

**Best for: Dark Colored Scars**

Chemical peels remove dead skin cells from the superficial layers of the skin to help minimize any discoloration. They create a controlled wound leading to new collagen production that can improve superficial depressed scars.

**Best for: Firm, Thick Scars**

Cryosurgery uses liquid nitrogen to cause the scar tissue to decrease in size. Sprayed on, it may also help minimize discoloration and soften a scar.

Cortisone injections consist of injecting a steroid into the skin to cause atrophy of the scar tissue, resulting in a softer and flatter scar.

**Best for: Depressed Scars and Old, Pigmented Scars.**

Microneedling uses tiny needles to make small punctures in the skin so collagen can form and even out the scar's complexion.