

Wrist lacerations

Self-inflicted wrist or forearm laceration is a specific type of injury presenting to emergency departments. You are likely to see many patients with this presenting complaint. These are treated as an emergency, especially if vascularly compromised and may involve the plastics, vascular or orthopaedic surgeons for repair of damaged underlying structures.



Why people self-harm

Self-harm is more common than many people realise, especially among younger people. It is estimated around 10% of young people self-harm at some point, but people of all ages do. This figure is also likely to be an underestimate, as not everyone seeks medical help. In most cases, people who self-harm do it to help them cope with overwhelming emotional issues, which may be caused by:

- social problems
- trauma
- psychological causes

These issues can lead to a build-up of intense feelings of anger, guilt, hopelessness and self-hatred. The person may not know who to turn to for help and self-harming may become a way to release these repressed feelings. Self-harm is linked to anxiety and depression and these mental health conditions can affect people of any age. They must be addressed before they escalate to suicide attempts. Self-harm can also occur alongside antisocial behaviour, such as misbehaving at school or getting into trouble with the police. Although some people who self-harm are at a high risk of suicide, many people who self-harm don't want to end their lives. In fact, the self-harm may help them cope with emotional distress so they do not feel the need to take their own life.

Management of self-harm via wrist-cutting

1. Washout wound thoroughly with 1 litre of normal saline
2. If it a superficial wound with a neurovascularly intact hand, consider suturing in the ED
3. If a hand is not vascularly intact, refer to plastic surgery as an emergency
4. Refer to plastics if nerve involvement or deep wound requiring surgical input
5. Perform a wrist X-ray to identify any foreign body or fractures to the wrist bones
6. Determine tetanus status and administer immunoglobulins if unsure
7. Determine hand dominance and occupation
8. Consider administering antibiotics with dirty wounds
9. Refer for psychiatric consultation (may be delayed until after theatre)
10. Recommend self-help charities and organisations (such as those mentioned below)
11. Enquire about any deliberate self-harm elsewhere in the body
12. Take an elicit drug-use and alcohol history
13. Enquire about any dependents and consider a child protection referral

Useful organisations to recommend in the ED for patients who have self-harmed

There are organisations that offer support and advice for people who self-harm, as well as their friends and families. These include:

- Samaritans
- Mind
- Harmless
- National Self Harm Network forums