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Scar Management



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## Scar management: physical, psychological and social challenges

# Possible impact of scarring

Marthe Egberts

Living with scars can be challenging. Scars are visible from the outside, but there may also be 'invisible scars' on the inside that are not readily seen by others. You can compare this with looking at an iceberg; above the surface there's an obvious visible part, while underneath the surface there is an (extensive) part of the iceberg that is not immediately seen. When it comes to scarring, this invisible part can literally exist of the skin layers that are affected which cannot be seen with the naked eye. Another invisible part is the emotional impact of scarring. It is really important to pay attention to these invisible parts of scarring, because it influences the quality of life for the person with scars, as well as that of the person's family.

### Lifelong impact

Scars may negatively influence quality of life; physically, psychologically as well as socially. Both adults and children with scars may experience reactions such as traumatic stress, depressive symptoms or anxiety. For example, some people feel like the event in which they got scarred is happening again, which can be really frightening. These 'flashbacks' are sometimes evoked by looking at the scars. In the early phase, these reactions can be considered normal reactions to an abnormal situation. For most people, these reactions will disappear after a short period of time, but for a small though substantial group, they might last for a longer time.

There may also be social challenges, as scars will elicit reactions of others. Other people may stare, whisper, ask intrusive questions or act confused. Children may also experience these reactions from their classmates or friends. Because people start to fear these negative reactions of others, they sometimes rather avoid to meet with people or go out into the public.

Many people with scars will eventually adapt to the physical, psychological and social challenges faced. Sharing one's

experiences with peers and other people and receiving support from them helps in the adaption process. Some people see their scars as proof of the difficult time they went through, which reminds them of their own power and strength.

### A challenge in many ways

How people perceive their scars (for example in terms of severity or visibility) is important for a person's wellbeing.



Photos: Juzo

Pressure garments play a vital role in the treatment of scars.

This subjective experience of scarring appears to have a higher impact than the objective characteristics of a scar. Although outsiders might think that the scar is not that severe, for example because it can be covered by clothing, someone can still perceive their scar as bothersome and as having a big influence on their life. Some people are particularly bothered by the scar's looks (for example its colour or roughness), others dislike its physical consequences (for example pain, itch, or not being able to perform certain activities). Scars may also lead people to worry about intimacy and sexuality issues. They may, for example, feel less attractive or fear that someone will hurt them during intimate moments. A supportive partner is really helpful in this regard.

Scarring can result in people thinking more negatively about themselves, but scarring will not affect self-views for everyone. This depends partially on how important people think their own appearance is and to which extent they are bothered by opinions of other people.

### Scars affect the entire family

When children are affected by injury or scarring, there is a large impact on the whole family. In the first phase, it is very normal that all family members experience reactions such as anxiety, guilt, traumatic stress, worry, and negative mood. Parents may think about the influence of the scar on the child's future, sometimes fear that their child's appearance will be changed forever, that their child will be bullied because of the scars or that the child will no longer be able to participate in his or her favourite activities. It is normal and understandable that scarring evokes these thoughts and fears. Also, the physical aspects of scarring (such as pain and itch) can be difficult to manage for parents. Overall, despite the challenges faced, research has shown that most children and parents adapt well in the long term.

Parents have an important role in their child's adjustment to injury and scarring. Parents' own distress may affect their ability to know what their child needs and to act on these needs. It may be difficult for families to discuss the topic of scarring, for example because parents

### About the author

Marthe Egberts is a PhD candidate at the Association of Dutch Burn Centres and Utrecht University. Her research is mainly focused on the psychosocial impact of child burn injury on the family. She has conducted interviews with parents to better understand their experience after their child's injury, with a special interest in their experiences during child wound care. Her work focuses on long-term consequences for families as well and includes a study on adjustment in adults with burns and their partners. Marthe also joins the annual Dutch burn camps for children as a staff member.



think this might distress their child. Some families may leave the topic of scarring untouched for years. However, it is important to talk about the topic and to provide all family members the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts.

### Scar therapy today – versatile and promising

Any type of scar, be it from surgery, minor or major flame burns, or scalds, can have a serious impact on a person's quality of life. Different scar management options are available to improve the look of a scar, with treatment possibilities ranging from non-invasive to invasive.

Treatment options recommended by international scar management guidelines are medical ointments and creams, physical therapy, pressure garments, silicones, injectables, laser treatment and surgery (listed in order of invasiveness level). Initial scar management should be non-invasive rather than invasive. The treatment options described have shown positive outcomes and most treatments can be used for preventing the development of abnormal scars as well as improving the looks of already formed scars. The best outcomes are however achieved in an early phase (when the scar is still active), so it is best to start with scar management as early as possible.

Some people may experience barriers to fully engage in scar management, including the idea that taking care of scars

is time-consuming, distressing or painful. Nevertheless, commitment and adherence are very important. Miracles cannot be achieved, but improvement is possible, although it may take time to see the effectiveness of the chosen treatment. It may help to express worries, fears and expectations before the start of treatment, to stimulate optimal outcomes of scar management.

People with scars and parents of children with scars have to acquire new skills in taking care of the scars and fit this into their normal lives. On the one hand, this may be demanding and stressful, but on the other hand, people also seem to gain control out of this and experience a valuable contribution to their own or their child's recovery. It helps to see the scars develop in a positive way over time. Scars cannot be removed completely and the personal story of the scar remains with everyone, but improvement of the scar's look is definitely possible. <

*For references: Marthe Egberts*

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