Introduction

Wound assessment is essential in informing the selection of appropriate therapeutic strategies to achieve clinical goals, e.g. wound healing and improved patient wellbeing. This Made Easy describes a new approach to wound assessment that encourages clinicians to look beyond the wound edge to routinely assess and manage the periwound skin using the new Triangle of Wound Assessment.

Authors: Dowsett C (UK), Protz K (Germany), Drouard M (France), Harding KG (UK). Full author details can be found on page 6.

Importance of wound assessment

Wound assessment can be defined as information obtained using observation, questioning, physical examination and clinical investigations in order to formulate a management plan. It can also provide a baseline from which to monitor the wound, the effectiveness of therapeutic strategies over time and impact on patient wellbeing.

The concepts of wound bed preparation and the TIME framework were devised to aid decision-making by linking assessment findings to clinical actions. Since then a number of wound assessment tools have been developed using the principles of wound bed preparation.

Is a new approach to wound assessment needed?

A global anthropological study was conducted in 2013–14 with the aim of better understanding the impact of a wound on patients and to explore everyday wound management practice. A key finding from the study showed that practitioners separate wounds into three distinct, yet interconnected, zones or axes: the wound bed, the wound edge, and the periwound skin. Although the wound bed was judged to be the most intensely monitored zone, the study revealed that both healthcare practitioners and patients view management of the periwound skin as an integral part of wound healing.

The literature confirms that periwound skin problems are common. A survey of five English NHS Trusts (n=4772) found that 70% of patients had surrounding skin that could be characterised as dry, macerated, excoriated, or inflamed and a recent publication reported that, depending on exudate level, between 60% and 76% of wounds (n=958) were surrounded by problematic or unhealthy periwound skin. Given that unhealthy periwound skin is a significant problem in chronic wounds, further exploration of assessment of the periwound skin and its relevance to wound progression needs to be considered within the wound healing paradigm.

The periwound area has previously been defined as the area of skin extending up to 4cm beyond the wound edge; for some wounds damage may extend outward, whereby any skin under the dressing may be at risk of breakdown and should be included in any assessment. Frequent problems in the periwound area include maceration, excoriation, dry (fragile) skin, hyperkeratosis, callus and eczema.

While current tools offer a standardised approach to wound assessment, they focus on the wound itself and use limited descriptors to describe the periwound area. There is a need for an easy-to-use wound assessment tool that fully integrates assessment of the periwound area into the wound healing paradigm.

The Triangle of Wound Assessment

The Triangle of Wound Assessment is a new tool that extends the current concepts of wound bed preparation and TIME beyond the wound edge. It divides assessment of the wound into three areas: the wound bed, the wound edge, and the periwound skin. It should be used in the context of a holistic assessment that involves the patient, caregivers and family (Figure 1).
Using the Triangle of Wound Assessment

The Triangle of Wound Assessment identifies three distinct, yet interconnected, zones or axes, which call for different approaches:

- **Wound bed**: look for signs of granulation tissue, while seeking to remove dead or devitalised tissue, manage exudate level and reduce the bioburden in the wound.
- **Wound edge**: lower barriers to wound healing by reducing undermining for dead space, debriding thickened or rolled edges, and improving exudate management to minimise risk of maceration.
- **Periwound skin**: rehydrate dry skin and avoid exposure to exudate/moisture to minimise the potential for damage.

**Performing a holistic assessment**

A holistic assessment aims to gain an overview of the patient's medical condition, the cause, duration and status of the wound, together with any factors that may impede healing, including:

- comorbidities, e.g. diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, venous/arterial disease, malignancy

**Figures 2–4** show how the Triangle of Wound Assessment can be applied to practice, with recommendations for documentation and treatment aims (Figure 5) to guide clinical decision-making. The Triangle of Wound Assessment should be used as part of a holistic patient assessment.

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**Figure 2 | Using the Triangle of Wound Assessment — Wound bed**

Baseline and serial measurements of the *wound size* (length, width or area, and depth), *appearance* and *location*, will help to establish a baseline for treatment and monitor any response to interventions. The method of measurement should be used consistently to aid meaningful tracking of changes over a specified number of days (e.g. 7–14 days). Problems identified in the wound bed may extend beyond the wound edge to the surrounding skin (e.g. maceration, erythema, swelling).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue type</th>
<th>Please tick</th>
<th>Exudate</th>
<th>Infection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Necrotic</td>
<td>△ _%</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>△</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sloughy</td>
<td>△ _%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Granulating</td>
<td>△ _%</td>
<td>△</td>
<td>△</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epithelialising</td>
<td>△ _%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Record tissue types and % of tissue visible in the wound bed

Aim to remove non-viable tissue (e.g. reduce infection risk)
Protect and promote new tissue growth

Aim to treat cause (e.g. compression therapy) and manage moisture balance (exception: dry gangrene)

Aim to identify infection
Manage bioburden to treat infection/control odour
During healing, epithelial cells migrate across the wound bed to cover the surface of a wound (epithelisation). To allow migration, wound edges need to be moist, intact and attached to and flush with the base of the wound. Assessment of the edge (or rim) of the wound can provide information on wound aetiology, how healing is progressing, and whether the current management plan is effective. Common problems include:

- Maceration
- Dehydration
- Undermining
- Rolled edges

Please tick all △ that apply

Assess edge of the wound for moisture level

Aim to establish cause and correct (e.g. rehydrate)
Address patient concerns
Refer to specialist

Assess extent of undermining

Use clock positions to record position
Record extent of undermining

Assess amount of rolling (may be associated with thickening)

Assess edge of the wound for moisture level

Aim to establish cause and correct (e.g. rehydrate)
Refer to specialist

Aim to reduce the amount of undermining/allow the edge to reattach (e.g. stimulate granulation)

Aim to return the wound edge to a condition that will permit epithelial advancement

In addition, it is important to understand how the wound is affecting patient daily living, e.g. pain levels between and during dressing changes, sleep disturbance, strikethrough and malodour.

Certain wound types may indicate the need for additional investigations, e.g. patients with venous or arterial leg ulcers will require an ABPI. However, the diagnosis of wound infection is a clinical decision. Microbiological tests should not be used routinely, but when necessary, wound biopsy provides the most accurate information. The signs and symptoms of wound infection may vary according to wound type, e.g. diabetic patients with neuropathy and an infected foot ulcer may not report pain.

During the assessment procedure it is important for clinicians to recognise the limits of their knowledge and refer the patient for specialist opinion. For the less experienced, immediate referral to a more experienced clinician may be appropriate after the first visit.

Devising a management plan

The key to successful wound management is accurate and timely wound assessment of each individual. Once assessment is complete, an appropriate management plan can be devised. Patients should be included in setting treatment goals to ensure that their concerns and priorities are identified and taken into account.

The main goal is often wound healing, although this may not be appropriate in some patients, e.g. in a palliative care situation, when the objective may be to provide comfort and to control exudate and odour.
**Figure 4 | Using the Triangle of Wound Assessment — Periwound skin**

Problems of the periwound skin (i.e. the skin within 4cm of the wound edge as well as any skin under the dressing) are common and may delay healing, cause pain and discomfort, enlarge the wound, and adversely affect the patient’s quality of life. The amount of exudate is a key factor for increasing the risk of periwound skin damage. Greater moisture exposure reduces skin barrier function and increases the risk of skin breakdown and maceration. This may make patients more susceptible to developing a contact dermatitis. Erythema and swelling may also indicate infection, which should be treated according to local protocols. In addition to the periwound skin, patients with wounds should also be assessed for problems that may be affecting their skin more widely.

![Image of wound problems](image)

**Please tick all △ that apply**

- Maceration
- Excoriation
- Dry skin
- Hyperkeratosis
- Callus
- Eczema

Assess periwound skin and record extent of any problems, e.g. <1–4cm of the wound edge

- Aim to protect periwound area and maintain intact healthy skin
- Establish cause and correct, e.g. minimise contact with moisture or rehydrate periwound skin
- Manage exudate (e.g. select causal treatment — compression therapy/appropriate dressing)
- Rehydrate wound edge (e.g. barrier cream)
- Remove non-viable tissue (debridement)
- Protect granulation/epithelial tissue (e.g. non-adherent dressing)

**Figure 5 | Using the Triangle of Wound Assessment — Devising a management plan**

Accurate and timely wound assessment is important to ensure correct diagnosis and for developing a plan of care to address patient, wound and skin problems that impact on healing.

Identify treatment goal, e.g. 100% granulation tissue/healed wound. If no signs of improvement after 2–4 weeks, review treatment plan/refer to specialist.

- Manage exudate (e.g. select causal treatment — compression therapy/appropriate dressing)
- Rehydrate wound edge (e.g. barrier cream)
- Remove non-viable tissue (debridement)
- Protect granulation/epithelial tissue (e.g. non-adherent dressing)
- Remove non-viable tissue (debridement)
- Manage exudate (e.g. select causal treatment — compression therapy/appropriate dressing)
- Rehydrate wound bed (e.g. antimicrobials)
- Rehydrate wound bed (e.g. hydrogel)
- Protect granulation/epithelial tissue (e.g. non-adherent dressing)
- Manage exudate (e.g. select causal treatment — compression therapy/appropriate dressing)
- Protect skin (e.g. barrier product/atraumatic dressings, avoid allergens)
- Rehydrate skin (e.g. emollients)
- Remove non-viable tissue (debridement)
Setting treatment goals
For the majority of patients, treatment choices should aim to correct the underlying cause (e.g. compression therapy to address underlying venous disease and offloading/pressure relief for the management of diabetic foot ulcers and pressure injuries) and aim to manage the local wound environment to promote wound healing.

Treatment goals may be to:
- protect granulation/epithelial tissue
- debridement of non-viable tissue (e.g. necrosis and slough) to reduce risk of infection
- manage moisture balance (rehydrate or reduce exudate levels to create a moist wound environment, e.g. using an appropriate dressing)
- reduce wound bioburden/manage infection (e.g. topical antimicrobial therapy — including antiseptic agents — may be used for local infection and combined with antibiotic therapy for spreading or systemic infection)
- protect surrounding skin (e.g. reduce risk of maceration due to excess moisture or rehydrate dry skin)
- improve patient wellbeing (e.g. reduce pain and minimise wound odour)

Treatment goals will change over time as the wound progresses towards healing. It is important to set dressing change frequency against these goals and document the reasons for how often the dressing needs to be changed (e.g. exudate level, expected wear time). The wound should be reassessed at each dressing change, with regular reassessment of the current therapy to ensure it remains effective. For example, exudate production usually decreases as wounds heal. Any change in the colour or consistency of exudate or increase in odour or level of production should prompt further review and a reassessment of the management plan.

Documenting wound assessment
Formal wound assessment charts are useful to ensure that all relevant areas are covered during assessment, and to act as a guide in terms of what should be documented.

All observations and assessments (including photographs), the management plan and rationale, and schedule for reassessment should be documented to aid monitoring and facilitate communication between caregivers. Accepted terms and commonly understood language should be used for clarity.

Involving the patient in wound assessment
Patients with wounds may experience feelings of powerlessness because of a lack of control over their management. Seeking and including the patient's experiences and priorities in the assessment process, and sharing the consequent decision-making, are important ways of empowering patients.

In addition to improving the quality of the relationship between the patient and the healthcare practitioner, such empowerment is likely to result in better outcomes by enhancing concordance with treatment interventions and encouraging self-monitoring and management.

Benefits of using the Triangle of Wound Assessment
The Triangle of Wound Assessment is a simple tool that can be used to further engage patients in the management of their wound. Information should be provided to patients using language that is easily understood. Printed material is a useful way of reinforcing verbal information. An understanding of the Triangle of Wound Assessment will enable patients to be able to recognise signs indicating positive progress, or that reassessment or further intervention is required.

The development of an intuitive wound assessment tool that goes beyond the wound edge to include the periwound skin extends the opportunities for improved decision-making. It advances practice by facilitating early identification of patients at risk of periwound problems and the implementation of appropriate prevention and treatment strategies. As such, the tool offers a natural evolution in current thinking and is based on recent anthropological research that has shown integration of the periwound area within wound assessment is:
- important to the patient
- important to the clinician
- important for healing
- important for good patient outcomes.
References


Author details

Dowsett C1, Protz K2, Drouard M3, Harding KG4.

2. Nurse/Project Manager Wound Research, Institute for Health Services Research in Dermatology and Nursing, University Medical Centre, Hamburg, Germany
3. Dermatologist, Hôpital Huriez, Lille, France
4. Dean, Cardiff University and Medical Director, Welsh Wound Innovation Centre, Wales, UK

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Summary

A new approach to wound assessment has been developed following research indicating that healthcare practitioners consider the wound as three distinct areas or axes. These are the wound bed, the wound edge and the periwound skin; assessment of these forms the Triangle of Wound Assessment. Using the tool as part of a holistic assessment will help healthcare practitioners look beyond the wound itself, which has been found to be important for clinical and patient outcomes.