

## Plastic Surgery

# Skin graft to the leg

**Information leaflet for patients with a split skin graft (SSG) to the leg.**

### Why do you need a skin graft?

You may have a skin wound because of:

- An injury or burn
- A severe skin infection
- Surgery to remove a lesion caused by skin cancer

If the wound is small and the skin around is loose, the edges can sometimes be closed together (direct closure).

If the wound cannot be closed, or it is large, a skin graft is used to repair the area.

### What is a skin graft?

A skin graft is a surgical procedure where a thin piece of healthy skin is taken from another part of your body (donor site) and placed over the wound (graft site).

The graft heals by connecting to the blood supply at the wound, which allows the new skin to survive. This usually takes about 5 days.

The main benefit of a skin graft is that it is a relatively simple procedure and can cover larger wounds effectively.



### **Risks and complications**

There are some risks with a skin graft, including:

- The graft may not take, which could mean more surgery is needed.
- Blood or fluid may build up under the graft and may need to be removed.
- There is a risk of infection, which could cause part or all of the graft to fail.
- Grafts can sometimes fail, so it is important to look after the graft carefully for the first 2 weeks.
- **Do not smoke**, as smoking slows the growth of blood vessels and can affect how well the graft heals.
- There may be raised scars, or the graft may not look exactly like the surrounding skin.
- The grafted area may look like a patchwork at first and may be slightly sunken, but the appearance usually improves over time.

### **What will your graft look like?**

- At first, the graft may look red or purple and slightly sunken compared to the surrounding skin.
- This is normal and usually fades quite quickly
- Any indentation often fills out slowly over several months.
- Scars can take up to 18 months to fully mature, usually becoming pale, soft, flat and flexible.

### **Going home**

- Take it easy for 2 weeks and slowly return to your normal activities.
- Do not put strain on the grafted area.
- Time off work may be needed, depending on the size and location of the graft and your type of work. This could be 2 weeks or more.
- Avoid exercise that stretches or risks injury to the for 3 - 4 weeks.

## Patient Information

### Long-term care

- Use a non-perfumed moisturiser such as E45 or Nivea, 2-3 times a day to the graft and donor sites for at least 3 months or longer if the skin is still dry.
- Protect the graft and donor sites from direct sunlight. Keep covered for the first year, then use sunblock for ongoing protection.
- Ask your surgeon about camouflage makeup if you are concerned about how the graft looks.
- Some skin discolouration is normal at both the graft and the donor site. This usually improve overs 9 to 12 months, but the colour may not exactly match your previous skin colour.

### After the surgery

- The graft may be held in place with staples, stitches or glue, depending on the size and location of the graft.
- Do not touch or remove the dressing yourself. Keep it as dry as possible, unless your healthcare team advises otherwise.
- You will have a padded dressing on the leg wound, which stays in place for 5 days. The surgeon will check the graft and arrange dressing removal at the plastic surgery dressing clinic in 5 to 8 days.
- The graft will be redressed regularly until it heals. Healing usually takes about 2 weeks, but it may take longer for some patients.
- Depending on your situation, you may be on bed rest for 2 - 10 days. This is important for your skin graft to heal. When allowed out of bed, you may wear a support bandage during the day but remove it at night.
- At home, continue to rest your leg. Slowly increase activity but avoid standing still, either walk short distances or sit with your leg up on a stool.
- The donor site dressing does not need changing for 2 weeks. It heals on its own. Sometimes, the donor site may take longer to heal and needs repeated dressings.
- You may need painkillers such as paracetamol. Do not take more than 8 tablets in 24 hours. The donor site may feel uncomfortable than the grafted area.
- Contact the hospital immediately if you experience severe or throbbing pain, bleeding or unpleasant smelling discharge from the graft or donor site.

## Patient Information

### More information

If you have any questions about your treatment or the service, please contact:

**Plastic Dressing Clinic:** Tel. 024 7696 6474

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