

Plastic Surgery

Skin grafts

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.

The skin graft may be a thin or thick layer of skin, depending on where it is taken from and the area it needs to cover.



Patient Information

The operation

You may have a local or general anaesthetic before the procedure. This will have already been discussed with you by your doctor.

Once the graft has been taken, it may be stapled, stitched, or glued in place. The technique used depends on the patient, the size of the graft and the area it needs to cover. The graft will then be covered with a dressing. Do not disturb the dressing yourself and keep it as dry as possible unless you are advised otherwise.

The dressing should stay in place for 5 to 7 days. After this, the plastic surgery nurses will check the graft.

The graft will then be redressed regularly until it has healed. Healing time varies from patient to patient but is usually around 2 weeks, although it may take longer.

The donor site dressing is usually changed after 10 to 14 days. The area will gradually heal, but occasionally it may need repeated dressings over several weeks. The donor site often causes more discomfort than the grafted area.

You may need painkillers such as paracetamol at regular intervals, but do not exceed the recommended dose of 8 tablets in 24 hours.

You should receive your follow-up appointments when discharged home. If you do not, please contact the plastic surgery secretaries.

Risks and complications

There are some risks with a skin graft, including:

- 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 the first 2 weeks.
- **Do not smoke**, as smoking slows the growth of blood vessels and can affect how well the graft heals.

Patient Information

- There may be raised scars, or the graft may not 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

Depending on your situation and where your graft is, you may need to rest for up to 14 days. Your healthcare team will give you specific advice, as rest is very important for your graft to heal.

Be careful with your grafted area, even if it is covered with a dressing.
Avoid stretching, lifting, or putting pressure on it.

You may need time off work, depending on the size and location of your graft and the type of job you do. Light activity is usually safe but avoid exercise that could stretch or injure the graft for 3 to 4 weeks.

Contact the hospital if you notice severe or throbbing pain, bleeding or an unpleasant smelling discharge from the grafted area or donor site.

Long-term care

- Use a moisturising cream such as E45, Nivea cream or Vaseline 2 - 3 times a day to both the graft and donor site for at least 3 months or longer if the skin remains dry.
- Ask your surgeon about camouflage makeup if you are concerned about how the graft looks.

Patient Information

- 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.

More information

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

- Plastic Surgery Specialist Nurses: 024 7696 6474
- Skin Cancer Nurse Specialists: 024 7696 6058 (or via switchboard Bleep 4316)
- Cancer Information Centre: 024 7696 6052

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, contact 024 7696 5225 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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