

Plastic Surgery Unit

Skin grafts

Why do I need a skin graft?

You may have a skin wound as a result of an injury or burn, a severe skin infection or surgery to remove a lesion caused by skin cancer. If the area is small and the skin nearby is loose, the wound can be closed by bringing the edges together (direct closure). If the wound cannot be closed together or the wound is large, then the wound can be repaired with a skin graft.

What is a skin graft?

Skin grafting is a surgical procedure in which a shaving of healthy skin is completely removed from another part of the body (donor site) and placed over the wound where the lesion was present (graft site).

The graft heals by taking up a blood supply from the base of the wound which allows the grafted skin to survive. This process usually takes about five days. The main advantage of a skin graft is that it is a relatively simple procedure and can easily provide cover for larger wounds.

The skin graft may be a thin or thick layer of skin depending on where this has been taken from and what area the graft needs to cover.

The operation

You may have a local or general anaesthetic prior to this 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.



Patient Information

These techniques depend on the patient, the size of the graft and the area to which it is applied. It will then be covered with a dressing. Do not disturb the dressing yourself. Please keep the dressing as dry as possible, unless you are advised otherwise.

The dressing needs to stay in place for five to seven days. Following this, the skin graft will be assessed by the plastic surgery nurses.

The graft will then be redressed regularly until healed. The time varies from patient to patient but is usually about two weeks. However, this may be longer.

The donor site dressing is usually changed after 10 to 14 days. It will gradually heal but occasionally the donor site needs repeated dressings over many weeks. The donor site often produces more discomfort than the grafted area.

You may need to take painkillers such as paracetamol at regular intervals, but do not exceed the stated dose of no more than 8 tablets in 24 hours.

You should receive your appointments for follow up when you are discharged home. If you do not, please contact the plastic surgery secretaries. Their contact numbers are located in the contact section at the end of this leaflet.

Risks/Complications

As with all surgery, there are possible complications. These include:

- Blood and fluid may build up under the graft and may need to be removed.
- There is a risk of infection. This may lead to partial or complete loss of the skin graft.
- Sometimes grafts fail. It is important to take care of the graft during the first two weeks to reduce the chance of it failing.
- **Do not smoke.** Smoking inhibits the growth of blood vessels, which will slow the process of taking up a blood supply.
- There may be raised scars/indentation and/or poor cosmetic appearance.

Patient Information

- The grafted area looks a bit like a patchwork to start with and may be depressed. It is never the same as the surrounding 'normal' skin, although the appearance will improve with time.

What will my graft look like?

Early on, the graft will appear reddish purple and indented compared to the surrounding skin. However, the graft usually fades quite quickly. There may be some indentation which will fill out slightly over a period of many months. So, the initial appearance should not cause alarm as it can take up to 18 months for a scar to 'mature', usually leaving a pale, soft, flat and supple surface.

When you go home

Depending on your individual circumstances or where your operation site is, you may be asked to rest for up to 14 days. You will be given specific advice regarding this as this is very important for the skin graft to heal.

Please be careful with your grafted area, even if this area has a dressing, and **avoid stretching and lifting.**

Depending on where your graft is, how big it is and what type of job you do, you may need to take time off work, for example two weeks or more. Exercise that might stretch or injure the graft should be avoided for three to four weeks.

Please contact the hospital if there is severe or throbbing pain, bleeding or an unpleasant smelling discharge in either the grafted area or the donor site.

Long term care

- Use a moisturising cream such as E45, Nivea cream or Vaseline two or three times a day on both the grafted site and the donor site for three months or longer if the area remains dry.
- Ask your surgeon about camouflage make-up if you are concerned about the appearance of the graft.
- Expect skin discolouration at both the graft and the donor site. This will gradually improve over the following 9 to 12 months but may not appear the same colour as your previous skin colour.

Patient Information

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

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

Plastic Surgery secretaries regarding outpatient appointments:

024 7696 5289 Mr Venus and Mr Rizkalla

024 7696 5225 Mr Wallace

024 7696 5223 Mr Eltigani, Ms Skillman and Mr Hardwicke

024 7696 5287 Mr Das Gupta

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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