

Advice for patients

Caring For Your Skin After a Skin Graft

Plastics Therapy Department

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What is a skin graft?

We use skin grafts when normal wound healing processes are unable to close a large skin defect.

The surgeon shaves the top layer of skin from an undamaged area (we call this the donor area) and uses this to help close the wound.

Skin grafts heal or 'take' by new blood vessels growing in to the graft and the skin graft attaching itself to the new area.

We can take donor sites from different areas of the body but usually it is from the thigh.

Skin graft healing

To allow the graft to 'take' it is important that it remains still. This means that you must restrict your movement, especially if the graft covers a joint or if it is on the leg.

We may advise you to rest in bed for a period of time or apply a splint in theatre to limit your movement of the area. Your doctor and physiotherapist will advise you on how long you will need to limit your movement.

The donor site will usually heal within 10-14 days, but may be quite painful for a few days. Taking painkillers may help.

Infection

Infection slows the normal wound healing process as the body concentrates on fighting the infection rather than healing the graft.

To prevent infection it is important that you keep the graft and your dressings dry, clean and in place until a member of the team reviews it unless we tell you otherwise.

Smoking

Smoking can slow graft healing, as there is less oxygen in the bloodstream to deliver to the graft. Less oxygen may mean the healing process takes longer. At your request we can refer you to our smoking cessation service.

After your Skin Graft

Once your skin graft heals there are several points to remember when caring for your skin.

Although your skin graft has healed and no longer needs dressings it is important to remember that the healing process is still ongoing 'underneath' and this continues for 18 months to 2 years.

You may experience changes in colour and sensation in the scar during the time it takes to mature and 'settle' down. Colour changes are noticeable especially with changes in temperature e.g. after a hot bath or shower - this is completely normal.

Initially you will have no sensation in the graft site. Over the coming weeks and months some sensation may return.

Protection

In the early stages of healing, newly healed skin grafts and donor sites are more delicate than ordinary skin. It is therefore important to protect these areas especially if you are involved in an activity where you could injure these areas such as playing contact sports.

Moisturising

Newly healed skin grafts and donor sites may become dry and itchy. You should wash these areas each day and moisturise these areas up to three times a day. This helps the condition and flexibility of your skin.

Various moisturisers can be used including:

- E45
- Unguentum Merk
- Diprobase
- Vitamin E cream
- Aqueous cream
- Bio-oil

Massage

Use firm circular movements when moisturising as this will help to absorb the moisturising cream and will help to soften the scarring.

Occasionally small blisters can appear on the healed areas as a result of excessive rubbing – if this occurs allow the blister to heal and then restart massaging and moisturising these areas.

Sunscreen

Newly healed skin grafts and donor sites are unable to protect themselves from sun damage. Therefore it is very important to avoid direct exposure to the sun as best you can and to use a high factor sunscreen (SPF 50) at all times.

Itch

A newly healed skin graft can itch (pruritis) and usually moisturising and massage will help this.

If the itching is more problematic then your GP may prescribe antihistamines.

Remember to avoid scratching the newly healed skin grafts or donor sites as the skin is still fragile and can be easily injured.

Further information

If you have any questions please contact:

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