

What is a split thickness skin graft?



Information for patients

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals



What is a skin graft?

A skin graft is a procedure to remove an area of skin from one part of the body and use it to cover a wound in another part of the body.

What are the benefits of a skin graft?

A skin graft can be used to mend a wound when it is not possible to stitch the wound together, either because the wound is too big or there is not enough extra skin to allow this.

What are the alternatives?

In certain instances, it may be possible to let a wound heal by itself naturally, or it may need to be closed using an alternative method. Your doctor will discuss these options with you if they are applicable.

What types of skin graft are there?

There are two types of skin grafts used. This information booklet looks at the split thickness skin graft (STSG).

What is a split thickness skin graft?

A split thickness skin graft involves shaving a thin sheet of skin from the thigh, buttock or upper arm. A graze like area is left behind which will heal over 2 to 4 weeks. A split thickness skin graft contains the epidermis (top layer of skin) and part of the dermis (a deeper layer of skin). This type of skin graft is more suitable for covering large wounds.

Following a split thickness skin graft you will be left with 2 wounds. The donor site refers to the part of the body from where the skin graft is taken. The graft site refers to the wound that will be covered with skin taken from the donor site. The graft site can be anywhere on the body.

How is the skin graft held in place?

It is important that a skin graft is held in place and does not move around as it must connect with the blood supply from its new area; this allows it to 'take' and survive. This usually takes at least 7 days. Skin grafts may be held in place by a variety of means including stitches, medical grade glues and dressings. If stitches or clips have been used, these are usually removed after 5 to 7 days.

What kinds of dressings are used?

Both the donor site and graft site will be dressed.

Graft site dressings

It is very important that the split thickness skin graft is protected from excessive movement which may shear the graft off and cause it to fail. A firm dressing, which may be stitched into position, is used to help keep the graft in place. Graft site dressings are normally removed 5-7 days following surgery, again this is usually at the Plastic Dressing Clinic. If the graft is on the arm or hand, a sling may be used to keep the area immobile until the graft has taken. For wounds below the knee, bandages from toe to knee are often used. Appointments for dressing changes and first graft and donor checks will be made for you before leaving the hospital. You will usually be asked to attend a dressing clinic in the outpatient department 5-7 days following your surgery.

Donor site dressings

A split thickness donor site will be covered with a padded dressing, which should be left in place where possible for 14 days. The dressing will become stiff and dry out as the wound heals. It is best to avoid disturbing the dressing. If there is a lot of ooze, reinforce it with more gauze and tape if necessary. However, the dressing in direct contact with the skin should not be disturbed. Donor site dressings are usually removed at the Plastic Dressing Clinic 2 weeks after your surgery, or

before if you are experiencing excessive leakage, an offensive smell or pain.

What can I expect after my operation?

You may experience some slight bleeding from your wound site. Leave the dressing in place and using a packet of sterile gauze or clean tissue press firmly, applying continuous pressure for about 10 minutes and if appropriate elevate the bleeding area. If the bleeding continues or becomes excessive telephone the Plastic Surgery Dressing Clinic, or out of hours contact F2 at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, or attend the Accident and Emergency Department at the Northern General Hospital.

What should I do if I have any pain?

It is normal to experience some soreness around your wound sites. As soon as you begin to feel some discomfort you need to start to take some painkillers. The nurse will talk to you about pain relief and how to manage this when you go home. Do not exceed the maximum daily dose.

Can I have a bath or shower?

It is important to follow the instructions you are given regarding the care of your wounds. Usually you will be asked to leave the dressing intact and keep it dry until you are seen in clinic. This is usually about 5-7 days following your operation. This will mean that you will not be able to take a shower during this time. However, if the wounds are to the head area, or upper arm, a bath will be possible if you can keep the wounds absolutely dry.

Is there anything I should look out for when I go home?

You should seek advice if you develop any of the following symptoms as these may be signs of infection:

- Temperature / feeling feverish
- Increased soreness, redness or swelling to the wound site
- Persistent bleeding
- Pus or excessive drainage from the wound

Please see the end of the leaflet for contact details.

What will the donor and graft site look like?

Donor site

Following a split thickness skin graft, the donor site will look like a large but healing graze when the dressings are removed. There are no stitches to be removed and, whilst you may want to cover it for comfort, the area will heal on its own. The redness will settle in 12 to 24 months (sometimes longer), and you will be left with a patch that is lighter or darker in colour.

Graft site

The graft often looks red or purple when the dressings are first removed. This can sometimes cause concern but it is completely normal. The colour will fade gradually over 3 to 12 months. A skin graft takes 12 to 24 months to reach its final cosmetic result, and excellent results are frequently achieved. However, the colour of the skin graft will never be exactly the same and it is usually lighter (but sometimes darker) than the surrounding skin. The skin graft will also not feel as smooth as the surrounding skin and will benefit from applying a moisturiser regularly. There is often an obvious indentation (dip) at the graft site. With time this dip may become less obvious, but it will not always disappear.

Long term care of the skin graft

Once fully healed the skin graft and donor site will require moisturising cream, 2-3 times daily is advisable. You should also protect the areas from sunburn with clothing, a hat and a high factor sun cream (SPF 30 or higher).

Will I need a follow up appointment?

If you need a follow up appointment with the consultant then details will be sent to you in the post.

When can I go back to work?

This will depend on your surgery. If appropriate, the surgeon will provide you with a note for work or you can complete a self-certification form.

When can I drive?

This will depend on the type of surgery and anaesthetic; the nurse or your consultant will advise you.

Who should I contact if I have any concerns or need further advice?

If you have a problem or need advice in the first 24 hours after going home please contact:

- the Bev Stokes Day Surgery Unit on **0114 226 6020** between 9.00am and 7.00pm, Monday to Friday **or**
- the Plastic Surgery Dressing Clinic on **0114 226 5147** between 8.00am and 4.00pm, Monday to Friday.

Outside of these hours contact F2 at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital on **0114 271 2992** (24 hour contact).

You can telephone NHS emergency and urgent care services on **111**.

There is also the NHS Walk-in Centre on Broad Lane, Sheffield, S1 3PB which is open 7 days a week, from 8.00am to 10.00pm.



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