

Information for patients

Free flap reconstruction

What is a free flap reconstruction?

Free flap reconstruction is an operation which involves removing an area of skin, underlying tissue and muscle with its blood supply and shifting it to the area needing reconstruction. This lifted area is called a 'flap'.

What happens before my surgery?

Before surgery, some patients attend a pre-admission clinic where the doctor will explain the surgery and you will sign a consent form.

At the clinic, the health care team will ask you about your health, medication and lifestyle. They may test your blood, take x-rays and an electrocardiogram (ECG).

Your doctor will talk to you about what medications to take before you come into hospital.

It is important to tell your doctor if you are taking any blood thinning medications, such as aspirin, warfarin or clopidogrel (Plavix).

Please bring your medications to hospital with you.

If you use a dosette box or pill organiser to take your tablets, please ask your pharmacist to print out a list of your current medications so you can bring this to hospital.

If you do not need to attend a clinic, we will telephone and tell you when you are scheduled for your operation and what to bring to hospital.

The day before your surgery, the hospital will call you to inform you of the time you need to stop eating and drinking and what time to come to hospital.

What will happen on the day of my surgery?

We ask that you shower before you come to hospital and remove jewellery, make up, nail polish and fake nails. It is advised that you leave valuables such as jewellery and large sums of money at home to decrease the possibility of items being misplaced or stolen.

On the day of your surgery, please make your way to the St Vincent's Day of Surgery Admission (DOSA) area, which is located on the first floor of the In-patient Services Building, Princes Street, Fitzroy.

When you arrive the nursing staff will check your pulse and blood pressure.

You will need an anaesthetic for your surgery. The anaesthetist (the doctor who will give you the anaesthetic) will meet with you before your surgery to talk to you about your health and the best anaesthetic for you.

A general anaesthetic (anaesthetic that puts you to sleep) is normally used for this surgery.

St Vincent's is a busy hospital so please be aware that you may need to wait up to three hours for your operation.

What happens during the surgery?

Microsurgery is used to connect the blood vessels from the shifted flap to the blood vessels at the area of reconstruction. The area where the flap is taken from is called the donor site and this is normally stitched closed.

This type of surgery usually takes between six to eight hours.

What happens after the surgery?

You will wake up from the anaesthetic in the recovery room and be transferred to your ward shortly after. A nurse will monitor your blood pressure, pulse and temperature.

You may have an oxygen mask to help you breathe and an intravenous (IV) drip in your arm giving you fluid. This will be removed once you are able to eat and drink. You will also have a dressing over your wounds. You may have a catheter in your bladder to monitor your urine output.

You will have drain tubes in both the flap and donor site areas to drain away any excess fluid and reduce swelling and infection.

Your new flap will be constantly observed for colour, warmth and temperature. You will not be permitted to drink until you are reviewed by your doctors the following day, however you may be given ice to suck.

You will remain resting in bed for three to five days. The physiotherapist may give you exercises during this time to help you to recover.

If you are in pain after surgery, there are a number of ways we can treat this. This will be decided by you, your doctors and nurses depending on the type of pain you have. You may be given tablets or an injection to make you feel better.

Your drain tubes will be taken out before you leave hospital.

When can I go home?

Most people stay in hospital for seven to ten days for this type of surgery. The nursing staff will show you how to care for your flap and donor site wounds and arrange for nurses to visit you at home if required.

Patients are usually discharged at 10am so the room can be prepared for another patient.

Before you leave the ward someone will:

- make a follow-up appointment at St Vincent's Specialist Clinics for you
- send a letter from the hospital to your local doctor (GP)
- give you medication, if the doctor prescribes it
- give you a medical certificate if needed (you will need to ask).

Please remember to take all your belongings including x-rays home with you.

What should I do once I get home?

Your doctor will recommend another two to four weeks off work (depending on your surgery) to give your body the best chance to recovery.

Protect the flap area from direct sunlight. Do not apply any pressure to the flap and do not wear any tight fitting clothes around the flap area.

You are encouraged to take gentle walks two to three times a week. Avoid doing any strenuous activity, especially lifting anything heavy (lift no more than 2-3kgs, like a bag of oranges) for four to six weeks and avoid sport for four to six weeks.

Refrain from smoking and limit your caffeine intake, as these stimulants can reduce blood supply to the reconstructed flap.

If you experience any increased pain, swelling, redness or any changes in the colour or look of your flap, go to your nearest emergency department or GP as soon as possible.

Contacts

Liaison Nurse

Tel: 9288 3884

Waiting List Officer

Tel: 9288 2271

This information is intended as a guideline only. If you have further questions or concerns, please speak to your doctor.