**What is a Split Skin Graft?**
A split skin graft is a surgical procedure where healthy skin is placed onto a prepared wound site. Skin grafts are normally used when a skin cancer has been cut from the body and the wound cannot be closed by using stitches.

A skin cancer is caused by the skin cells dividing and growing at an abnormal rate and can be noticed as a lump, an unusual blotch, a sore that doesn’t heal, or a mole that has changed or come up suddenly.

There are two types of skin cancers – basal (basic) cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). A skin cancer can be caused by sun damage, old age, genetics, some medications or x-ray overexposure.

A skin cancer needs to be removed if it is likely to spread or affect the normal function of your body.

**What happens before my operation?**
Before surgery some patients attend a pre-admission clinic. 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 or warfarin.

Please bring your medications into hospital with you. The staff will let you know about what to bring to hospital, and when to stop eating and drinking before your surgery.

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

**What will happen on the day of my Surgery?**
We ask that you shower before you come to hospital, and remove your jewellery, make up and nail polish. 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 and theft.

On the day of your surgery, please make your way to the St. Vincent’s Day of Surgery Admission 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.

For your surgery you will need an anaesthetic. 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?**
The surgeon will make a small cut to remove the skin cancer and some normal skin to ensure that the cancer has been completely removed.

A very thin layer of skin is taken from an area of your body normally covered by clothes such as the thigh or buttock area (called the donor site) and used to cover the area where skin cancer was removed.

The skin graft is laid over the wound and stitched or stapled into position.

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

You may have an oxygen mask on to help you breathe and an intravenous drip (IV) in your arm giving you fluid. This will be removed once you are tolerating your food and drink. You will not be permitted to eat and drink until four hours after surgery. This is because you may feel sick, vomit or have pain after your surgery.
Your pain may be treated in a number of ways. 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 help you feel better.

You will have dressings over your skin graft and donor site wound.

You will need to remain resting in bed for 5 days to allow the new skin graft to heal. The physiotherapist may give you exercises during this time to help you recover.

The dressing to your skin graft will be removed on day 5 and reviewed by the doctors. The newly grafted area will require daily dressings until fully healed.

The nursing staff will arrange for nurses to visit you at home if required, to attend to your dressings.

Your donor site dressing remains wrapped up until day 10, this wound tends to heal slowly and will be taken down by the district nurses or your G.P. if you have already gone home.

**When can I go home?**

Most people stay in hospital for 7 days for this type of surgery. The nursing staff will arrange for nurses to visit you at home.

Patients are usually discharged between 10am and 11am 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 Clinics for you.
- A letter will be electronically sent 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 and x-rays home with you.

**What should I do once I get home?**

- Your doctor will recommend another 2 to 4 weeks off work (depending on your surgery) to give your body the best chance to recovery.
- Protect the skin graft area from direct sunlight.
- Do not apply any direct pressure to the skin graft.
- Avoid doing any strenuous activity, especially lifting anything heavy (lift no more than 2-3kgs, like a bag of oranges) for 4 to 6 weeks.
- Avoid sport for 4 to 6 weeks.
- Refrain from smoking as this stimulant can reduce blood supply to the skin graft.

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

**Contacts**

Plastics Unit
St. Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne
PO Box 2900
Fitzroy Victoria 3065
Telephone: 9288 2211
Liaison Nurse: 9288 3884
Waiting List Officer: 9288 2271

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