

Information for patients

Skin cancer and split skin grafts

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.

What is skin cancer?

A skin cancer is caused by the skin cells dividing and growing at an abnormal rate. It can appear 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 over exposure to x-rays.

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 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 to 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 into 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 the pre-admission clinic, we will telephone you to tell you when your surgery is scheduled and what to bring to hospital.

You may also receive a letter informing you of your time and date of surgery. Please make sure you confirm your date for surgery.

The day before your surgery, the hospital will call you between 2.30pm and 7pm 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?

The surgeon will make a small cut to remove the skin cancer and some normal skin from the surrounding area to ensure that the cancer has been completely removed.

A very thin layer of skin (a graft) is taken from an area of your body normally covered by clothes, such as the thigh or buttock area. This area is known as the 'donor site'.

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

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 not be permitted to eat and drink until four hours after surgery. This is because you may feel sick or vomit.

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 wounds.

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

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

Your donor site dressing will be removed on day ten. This wound tends to heal slowly. The dressing can be removed by the district nurses or your GP if you have already gone home.

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

When can I go home?

Most people stay in hospital for seven days for this type of surgery. 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 to your local doctor (GP)
- provide wound dressings to take home (if needed)
- 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 skin graft area from direct sunlight and avoid applying direct pressure to the skin graft area.

You should avoid doing any strenuous activity, especially lifting anything heavy. Do not lift anything more than 2-3kg for four to six weeks after surgery (this equals the weight of a bag of oranges).

Get plenty of rest as you may feel tired after your hospital stay. You will be able to get dressed independently and should slowly increase your level of activity each day.

Smoking is not recommended as it can reduce blood supply to the skin graft.

If you experience any increased pain, swelling, or redness or notice 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

Tel: 9288 2211 (via hospital switchboard)

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.