

Discharge Instructions: Caring for Skin Grafts

These instructions explain what you or your care partner needs to do to continue your care at home. Please read and follow these instructions carefully.

Overview

A skin graft is a patch of skin surgically removed from one area of the body (donor site) and transplanted/attached to another area (recipient site).

General Instructions/Restrictions

- **Bathing:** Sponge baths or showers are allowed IF you make sure you do not get the operative sites wet. Do not swim or take a bath. Please check with your surgeon about when you can take regular showers and baths.
- **Driving:** You can return to driving if you are no longer taking narcotic pain medication, and you feel comfortable steering the vehicle.
- **Walking:** No restrictions, we encourage it.
- **Sleeping:** If the operative site is at the head and neck area, sleep with extra pillows to keep your head elevated.
- **Weight restrictions:** Do not bend, push, pull, strain, or lift anything that weighs more than 10 pounds for 2-4 weeks.
- **Smoking:** Avoid all nicotine including secondary smoke, smokeless tobacco, nicotine patches, and nicotine vapors for 6 weeks.

Caring for the recipient site skin graft

You will see a “bolster dressing” at the skin graft site. This is a bulky dressing that is secured on top of the skin graft with stiches or skin staplers. It prevents the graft from moving and allows the graft to pick up the circulation it needs from the tissue underneath. The bolster needs to stay in place for 5-7 days, sometimes longer and will be removed by the doctor at your postoperative clinic appointment. **Please do not attempt to remove this yourself and do not get the bolster wet.**

If the dressing gets wet by mistake, you may use a hair drier on low setting to dry it. No special care is needed to this site until after the bolster is removed. You will be provided with additional instructions on skin graft care once the bolster is removed.

Caring for the donor site for split thickness skin grafts

Split-thickness skin grafts are taken from the skin of the thigh. The procedure results in a wound that looks and feels like a brush-burn. You will see two layers of dressing here:

1) **a thin yellow gauze (xeroform®)** that is secured on the donor site with stiches. This will remain in place for 2-3 weeks until the skin heals from underneath. Do not attempt to remove the yellow layer. The care of the yellow layer is much easier once it is dry. You may use a hair dryer at low setting to expedite the drying period or you may leave it uncovered and let it dry on its own. Once dry, you do not need to reapply an outer dressing and you can wear your normal clothes.

2) **a bigger pad (gauze)** on top that is secured with tape. This outer gauze has to be removed the day after surgery.

Caring for the donor site for full thickness skin grafts

Full-Thickness Skin Grafts can be taken from different areas of the body, typically from the neck, chest or behind the ear. The donor site(s) will be closed using stitches and will look like a straight line closure. After 48 hours, you can remove the dressing over the incision. You do not need to reapply dressings.

When to Call the Doctor

Once you are home from the hospital, please call us if you have:

- signs of infection: redness that spreads beyond the incision, increased pain or tenderness, foul smelling odor, drainage with pus, swelling, and/or fever above **100.4°F (38.3°C)**. Note that a low-grade temperature (less than 100.4°F) is normal after surgery.
- signs of excessive bleeding at the site of your surgery or slow oozing that soaks the dressing
- Please call the Head, Neck and Plastic Surgery clinic at **716-845-8186**. The clinic is open 8a.m. – 5p.m., Monday – Friday.
- After hours: You can reach Roswell Park 24/7 at **716-845-2300** or toll free at **1-800-ROSWELL (1-800-767-9355)**. Your call will be answered by our Call Center and nurse triage staff.
- If it is determined you need to be seen, you may be asked to come to our Assessment & Treatment Center (ATC), which is open 24/7. You need to be referred to the ATC by your Roswell Park provider (or the provider on-call); it is not a walk-in clinic.

If you have shortness of breath or chest pain, please call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room immediately.