

Skin Graft Surgery

What is a skin graft?

A skin graft is surgery to repair the skin. You might need a skin graft to:

- Treat a serious burn
- Help your skin heal after removing skin during surgery, such as during skin cancer or plastic (reconstructive) surgery
- Repair an area of skin loss due to trauma, a disease, or other medical condition

What happens during surgery?

- In most cases, you are given anesthesia to make you sleep.
- A piece of healthy skin (the “graft”) is taken from a place on the body called the “donor site”.
- The graft is spread out over the area that needs to be repaired. It is fixed into place with staples or stitches and bandages (dressings).
- You will likely go home the same day of surgery. However, depending on your surgery, you may have to stay a few days at the hospital so the doctor and staff can make sure you are healing well before you can go home. Check with your doctor.

My follow-up appointment

Date/Time: _____

Place: _____

Doctor: _____

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor right away if you have:

- Bright red blood, pus, or a foul-smelling odor at the graft or donor site
- Difficulty breathing
- A temperature of 101°F (38°C)
- Chills that last more than 12 hours
- Uncontrolled nausea
- Vomiting that does not stop
- Pain that doesn't get better

What are the risks?

There are certain risks with any surgery. Some **common risks** include:

- Pain
- Bleeding, infection, and swelling
- Nerve damage
- Graft failure
- Uneven skin surface
- Skin discoloration
- Scarring
- Nausea and vomiting from pain medicines

Some **uncommon risks** include:

- Having chronic pain and sensitivity at the graft site (rare)
- Limited movement at the graft site (rare)

How do I prepare?

Plan for appropriate recovery time and arrange to be cared for by a family member or friend. Because you will have anesthesia, you will not be allowed to drive yourself home from the hospital. Make sure a friend or family member can take you home and to stay with you for a few hours after the procedure.

Follow your doctor's instructions on what you should do to prepare for the surgery. You may be asked to stop taking some of your regular medicines a few days before your surgery.

Follow all instructions on eating and drinking before your surgery. You may be asked not to eat or drink anything at all for several hours before your surgery. If you don't follow these instructions, you may not be able to have anesthesia and your surgery will need to be scheduled for another day.

What can I expect after surgery?

Recovery from skin graft surgery may take between 2 weeks to several months depending on your graft.

You can expect to feel some side effects for the first few days, such as:

- Sore throat from the breathing tube during the surgery
- Red and raw skin at the graft and donor site
- Limited movement, depending on where the graft is located
- Weeping and yellow (serous) drainage
- Pain at the graft and donor sites (It is common for the donor site to have more pain.)
- Slight fever (less than 101°F or 38°C)
- Nausea and vomiting from pain medicines
- Possible constipation from pain medicines

How do I care for myself at home?

- **Protect your graft.** Follow your doctor's instructions on your activities. The graft is fragile and may not heal properly if it's not cared for correctly.
- **Follow the wound care instructions from your doctor.** These instructions will show you how to change your dressings and when you can take a shower or bath.
- **Drink clear liquids** (water, broth, apple juice) after the procedure to avoid dehydration and to help with constipation. You may also need to take a stool softener or mild laxative if you get constipated.
- **Eat a healthy diet** with lots of fruits and vegetables to support healing.
- **Don't use tobacco products** of any kind—including vapes. Nicotine can slow blood flow to the wound, which can slow healing.
- **Take your medicines as ordered by your doctor.** These will help with pain control and help you avoid infection. Don't use alcohol or street drugs during your recovery. They can cause a deadly reaction when mixed with certain pain medicines.
- **Avoid strenuous activities for 2 weeks.** Plan to rest and recover during this time. Ask your doctor when you can return to work or school.

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