

Care of Your Skin Graft After Surgery

What is a skin graft?

A skin graft is a surgical procedure involving moving a piece of skin from a healthy area of the body (known as the donor site) and placing it onto an area that needs skin coverage, for example, onto a current wound, burn or any area of skin that was surgically removed.

For a larger wound, muscle might also be taken to fill a deeper area and then a skin graft is placed over top of the moved muscle. The care of the graft will be similar in both situations.

The 4 essentials of graft care:

1. Cleaning

There are 2 ways to clean your graft at home;

1. Using a wash cloth and unscented mild soap, clean the graft using gentle pressure to remove crusts and the buildup of lotion.

OR

2. While taking a shower, use a soft clean cloth, and gently rub the grafted area, while water trickles over the area.
3. Pat the graft area dry graft after either method.

Daily cleaning will gently remove any graft debris, lotion buildup and keep the new skin fresh while it remodels and strengthens over the next several weeks.

2. Protective Dressings

- If you are discharged with protective dressings, you will need the following supplies when you leave the hospital. You will be shown how to use them.

List of materials:

- Protective dressings cover your graft and prevent injury to the fragile new skin from bumps and scrapes
- If you are using protective dressings, apply them after cleaning the graft and before you apply a tensor or compression garment.

3. Moisturizing

- New grafts lack oil glands for several months, leaving them dry and even flaky until new oil glands are created.
- Moisturizing with unscented water based lotions will help with dryness, possible itchiness, scar reduction, and improve skin hydration and softness.
- Moisturize the graft at least once a day and more often if the grafted skin is dry.
- Moisturize before applying the protective dressings.
- Once protective dressings are not needed anymore, still continue to moisturize until the graft is naturally hydrated on its own.

4. Tensor and Compression Guidelines

When you are resting, elevating the limbs with grafts promotes healing. We suggest you do this often as possible. It is common to have swelling for long periods (anywhere from a couple of weeks to months) after a skin graft surgery. Reducing swelling helps improve and increase the healing process.

Compression is important as it:

1. Reduces swelling
2. Helps support the healing process and
3. Helps reduce and flatten the scars

Compression starts immediately after surgery and depending on the size of your graft and where the graft is on your body, it may be necessary for you to continue compression for up to 1 year or more. The amount of time your wound will need compression will be discussed at your aftercare appointments with your Plastic surgeon, occupational therapist or wound clinician.

Tensors:

- When in the hospital, the Physiotherapist or nursing staff applied a tensor bandage over your graft.
- Tensors can stay on for up to 4 hours. After this, we recommended that you unwrap the tensor, elevate and rest for a short time (30-60 minutes). Then you can rewrap for another 4 hours for mobilizing.
- There is a wrapping technique that improves compression. This was shown to you while in hospital.
- There is a video on YouTube where you can review this technique: <https://youtu.be/PXbA6QyvPtU>
- Using a tensor is temporary. Eventually, at an after-care appointment, you will be changed to a compression garment that can work for longer periods of time.

Compression garments:

- Many people get discharged already wearing compression garments.
- These are to be worn 23 hours a day, 1 hour off for hygiene and graft care.
- It remains important for you to elevate limbs with grafts whenever you are resting.
- You should have received 2 pairs; this allows you to be wearing one set while the other can be hand washed and hung to dry. Change either daily or when dirty.

Need to know!

- **Grafts can create scars so please take compression seriously** if you want the best aesthetic outcome for yourself.
- Grafts can be red/purple for several months. This discoloration will fade over time.



Immediately after surgery



10-12 months after surgery

** results will vary

- Grafts are sensitive to sunlight exposure and can sunburn easily, especially during the first 12 months. It is best to avoid direct sunlight and wear a high numbered sunscreen when outside during this time.
- This area can also be sensitive to temperature changes.
- It is common for grafts to develop small blisters or small open areas in the first several months from friction and movement. Protect your graft with a dry dressing. It is fine to add a dab of antimicrobial ointment daily until it heals.



Call your doctor if any of the following occur

- If your graft area suddenly becomes red, hot, painful, swollen and/or new discharge is noted
- Headache, muscle aches, dizziness, or general ill feeling
- Cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, severe nausea and/or vomiting
- More and more blisters or small open areas keep appearing on the graft and none of them appear to be healing after several days



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with patients
and families

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