

My SKIN GRAFT

WHAT IS A SKIN GRAFT?

A skin graft is when a thin piece of skin taken from another part of your body (called the 'donor site') is used to cover a wound in another location on your body (called the 'graft site'). Skin grafts can be full-thickness or split-thickness.

- **Full-thickness skin grafts:** are used to cover small open wounds. Skin is usually taken from in front of or behind the ears, the neck, the inner side of the upper arm, the groin, or the abdomen;
- **Split-thickness skin grafts:** are used to cover larger open wounds. Skin is usually taken from the thigh, buttocks, or upper arms. These grafts only use the top layer and the upper part of the second layer of skin.

Skin grafts may be stitched, stapled, or glued in place.

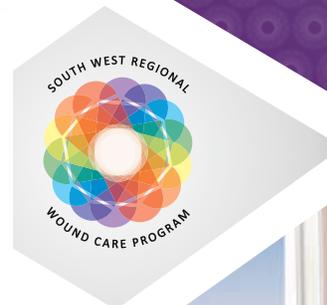
HOW DO I CHANGE MY SKIN GRAFT DRESSING?

You may have a tie-over dressing (i.e. a foam dressing that has been stitched in place) or gauze dressing over the graft immediately after your surgery. Depending on the location of your graft and your surgeon's practices, a tensor bandage may cover the graft dressing. The whole dressing is usually left in place for five-seven days after your surgery, and then removed by your surgeon. Do NOT take the dressing off before it is due to be changed, as you may damage the graft. If the area feels itchy, do NOT scratch or rub the area as this may damage the graft.

WHEN SHOULD I CONTACT MY SURGEON?

Call your surgeon immediately if you develop signs of a skin graft infection (that can happen up to 30 days after your surgery). *Signs of infection include:*

- Redness around the graft site that may feel warm and that may spread outward away from the graft site;
- Firmness or swelling around the graft site;
- Increased amounts of drainage from the graft site, that may appear greenish, brown or like pus, and that may be bad smelling;
- A fever higher than 38* Celsius, that lasts more than four hours (higher than 37* Celsius in the elderly);
- A closed graft site that opens up again, and;
- A tired feeling that will just not go away.



For more information go to:
swrwoundcareprogram.ca



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“MY
SKIN
GRAFT”

Instructions on how
to care for your or your
loved one's skin graft





COMMON QUESTIONS

When it's time for your first dressing change (five to seven days after your surgery), your surgeon may:

- Trim off any extra skin overlapping the graft site;
- Remove any stitches or staples;
- Gently clean the edges of the graft where there may still be some open tissue (not the grafted skin);
- Cover the open areas with a dressing containing petrolatum to keep it from drying out;
- Cover the whole graft with a non-stick dressing to protect it. This dressing often stays on for one week, and/or;
- Apply a piece of Tubigrip, which is like a tight sock. Tubigrip works to put mild pressure on the skin graft to help reduce scarring. If more pressure is needed, an occupational therapist (OT) may measure you for a special garment. Such garments must be ordered and usually takes a few weeks to arrive. While you wait for the special garment, you may be asked to wear the Tubigrip. Once the garment arrives, your OT will make sure it fits you right, and will teach you how to use and care for it. The garment is to be worn at all times, except when you are bathing, until the OT or your surgeon tells you to stop.

At the first dressing change, your graft may look pink or red and may have some small blisters. It may also look smooth with a mesh like pattern. This is normal.

WHAT ABOUT THE DONOR SITE?

The area of your body where you had the graft removed is called the donor site, and care of this area depends on the type of skin grating procedure you had done.

- If you had a full-thickness graft, your donor site will be stitched or stapled in place and covered by a dressing. Your surgeon will give you instructions on how to change your dressing if you, a family member, friend, or neighbor is capable of doing so. Full-thickness donor sites often heal and leave behind a flat or slightly bumpy scar;
- If you had a split-thickness graft, your donor site will look like a 'graze', such as when a child falls and skins their knee. There are no stitches or staples around this donor site, and the site will appear bright pink in color. This pink color will fade over time and usually resumes the tone of your regular skin (but not always). You may wish to cover this area with a dry non-stick dressing for comfort, and if so, your surgeon will instruct you on how to change the dressing, if you, a family member, friend, or neighbor is capable of doing so.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT CARING FOR MY SKIN GRAFT/DONOR SITE?

- The graft will be making a new blood supply the first few weeks after your surgery, so it is important to take things easy to allow the graft to heal properly. Follow your surgeon's instructions about exercise;
- Do not lie on the graft or rub the grafted tissue, even if it is itchy;
- Bruising and swelling are normal after your surgery. This usually goes away within a week;
- Do not wash, bathe, or shower until the surgeon has told you that you can. Bathing/showering may cause infection and may keep the graft from 'taking';

- When you are given permission to wash, bathe, or shower by your surgeon, do so using mild, non-scented, pH balanced soap. Rinse well and pat the grafted tissue dry afterwards. Don't vigorously rub the tissue;
- Protect your grafted skin and donor site from the sun for at least one year. Wear SPF 30-50 sunscreen whenever the graft or donor sites will be exposed to the sun, even in the winter. It is best to put sunscreen on at least 30 minutes before you go out into the sun, and reapply every two hours or immediately after swimming, towel drying, or sweating a great deal;
- Moisturize your skin graft and donor site at least daily (once it is 'healed') with a mild, non-scented moisturizer to keep it from drying out. Let the lotion soak in before you put on your pressure garment or other clothing;
- Scars can take up to 18—24 months to mature and for inflammation to resolve. Until that time, you may notice different feelings in the scar tissue with changes in temperature, and;
- You may get a blister on your skin graft. This is not unusual. Let your surgeon know immediately if this happens so they can teach you how to care for it.