What is a skin graft?
A skin graft is a piece of skin taken from another part of the body, called the donor site and used to cover the wound (graft site).

‘Full thickness skin grafts’ are used for small areas. Skin can be taken from areas in front of and behind the ears, the neck, inner side of the upper arm, groin and the abdomen.

‘Split thickness grafts’ use only the top and part of the second layer of the skin. This skin is shaved from the thigh, buttock or upper arm and used to cover larger areas.

Things to do before your surgery:
- If you smoke, try to stop smoking at least a week before your surgery.
- Smoking slows wound healing and makes you more likely to get infection in the graft.
- If you are diabetic, keep your fasting blood sugar under control.
- Tell your surgeon if you are taking aspirin or a blood thinner.
- Take a shower or bath and wash your hair the night before or morning of your surgery.

Things to know after the surgery:
Medications:
- Take your pain medication and any antibiotics ordered by your surgeon

Dressings to the graft site:
- The skin graft will be fastened to the skin around by sutures (stitches) or staples
- A foam dressing is often sutured over it to keep the graft in place
- This will be left for 5 to 7 days, and then removed by the nurse or the doctor in the clinic or by the visiting nurse (sometimes it will be left longer)
- If the area feels itchy, do NOT scratch or rub the dressing or you may damage the fragile graft.
- After it is removed, the nurse will:
  - gently clean the edges of the graft where there may still be some open tissue
  - apply a small amount of antibiotic ointment such as bactroban to any open areas (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.

Prevent bleeding or injury to the graft site:
- The graft will be forming a new blood supply over the next two weeks
- You will need to take things easy for the first two weeks to allow the graft to heal properly.
- The graft is fragile, so it is important not to rub or move the graft or dressing.
- Avoid stooping or bending forward for a few days
- When in bed, do not lie on the wound area. Keep your head on at least one pillow.

Bruising and swelling that is normal:
- You may have dark purple or red bruising and swelling around the area, especially if the wound is near the eye.
- This usually settles by 7 days and the colour will fade to yellow or brown before it fades completely
Showering:

- **Do NOT wash or shower** until the surgeon has said that you may
- Your surgeon will decide when it is safe to wash or shower the area, or wash your hair if the graft is on your head
- Bathing or showering the graft site before it is healed may cause infection or cause disruption and death of the grafted skin.
- When you ARE allowed to wash or shower, wash with a non-perfumed soap and pat dry rather than rubbing or using any friction

Dressings to the donor site:
The area of your body where the graft is removed is called the ‘donor site’.

**Split-thickness:**
- If you had a split-thickness graft, the donor site will look like a ‘graze’ such as when a child ‘skins’ their knee when they fall.
- There are no sutures
- You may want to cover it with a non-stick dressing for comfort, but it will heal on its own
- It will be bright pink in colour
- This will fade over time, but will become lighter in colour and may have a different texture to the surrounding skin.

**Full-thickness:**
- The area will be sutured or stapled and covered by a dressing
- This will heal and leave a flat or slightly bumpy scar

Signs and symptoms of skin graft infection (this can happen up to 30 days after the surgery):

- Greenish/ brown/ pus or bad smelling drainage
- Increased pain or tenderness in the area of the incision or wound
- Increased swelling, firmness, redness or heat surrounding the incision/wound
- Fever higher than 38°C (100°F) --- older individuals may have fever at a lower temperature 37°C (99°F)
- A closed incision that opens up and starts to drain
- A tired feeling that doesn’t go away

If you have any of these symptoms contact your doctor or nurse right away!

Long-term changes to graft and donor sites:

- It can take 3-6 weeks for the skin graft to turn a normal colour. Until then, it may look gray, pale or dull.
- It might never be a perfect match with the skin around it
- Avoiding sun damage will keep it from getting worse
- Wear SPF 30 to 50 sunscreen whenever the graft site will be exposed to the sun
- Scars can take up to 18 months to two years to mature and for inflammation to resolve
- You might notice different feelings in the scar during this time with changes in temperature, e.g. after a hot shower or when exposed to cold
- It is important to use a moisturising cream or lotion every day

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SWRWCF Toolkit My Head_Neck_Face Skin Graft Jan_2013. Some content was adapted from Pan-Birmingham Cancer Network NHS Skin Graft-Your Operation Explained [http://www.birminghamcancer.nhs.uk](http://www.birminghamcancer.nhs.uk).