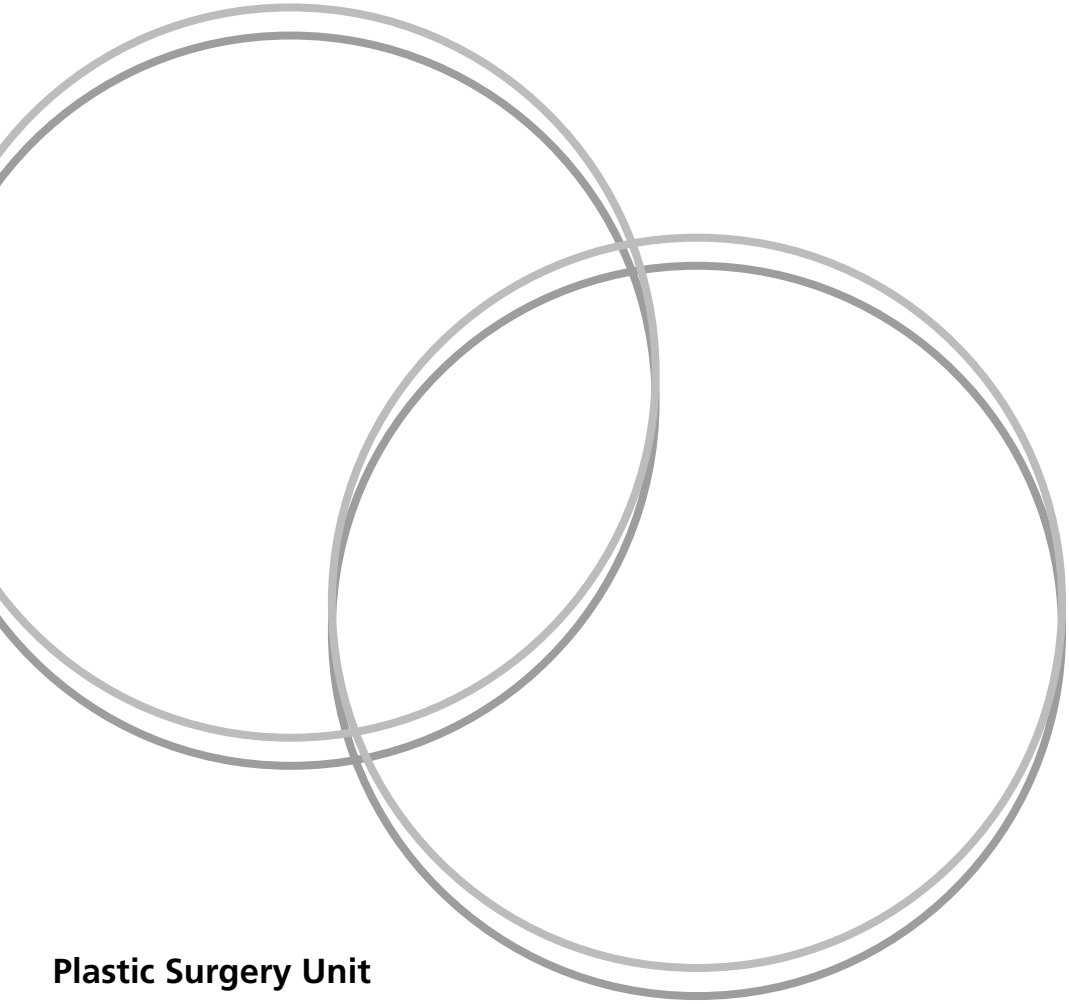
Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

# Split skin graft

## Information for patients



Plastic Surgery Unit

# Information leaflet for patients with a split skin graft (SSG)

## Why a skin graft?

You may have a skin wound as a result of surgery to remove a lesion caused by skin cancer, a severe skin infection, or from an injury or burn. If the area is small and the skin nearby is loose, the wound can be closed by bringing the edges together (direct closure).

If this is not possible, then the wound can be repaired with a skin graft.

## What is a skin graft?

Skin grafting is a surgical procedure in which a shaving of healthy skin is completely removed from another part of the body (called the donor site) and used to cover the wound, where the lesion was present.

The graft heals by taking up a blood supply from the base of the wound thereby allowing the grafted skin to survive.

# Risks/Complications

**The skin graft may not 'take'. This may require more surgery.**

- Blood and fluid may build up under the SSG.
- There is also a risk of infection; this may lead to partial or complete loss of the SSG.
- Sometimes SSGs fail. It is important to take care of the SSG during the first two weeks to reduce the chance of it failing.
- Do not smoke. Smoking inhibits the microscopic growth of blood vessels slowing the process of taking up a blood supply.
- There may be raised scars and/or poor cosmetic appearance.

## What will my graft look like?

Early on the graft will appear reddish / purple and indented compared to the surrounding skin. However the graft usually fades quite quickly and any indentation will often fill out to some extent over a period of many months. So the initial appearance should not cause alarm. It can take up to 18 months for a scar to 'mature', usually leaving a pale, soft, flat and supple surface.

## When you go home

Take it easy for two weeks, building up slowly into your 'normal' routine. Do not exert your grafted area. Depending on where your graft is, how big it is and what type of job you do you may need to take time off work, two weeks or more. Exercise that might stretch or injure the graft should be avoided for 3 – 4 weeks.

## After the surgery

The graft may be stapled, stitched or glued in place; these techniques depend on the patient, the size of the graft and the area to which it is applied.

Do not disturb the dressing yourself. Please keep the dressings dry (unless you are advised otherwise). Your graft will be checked on the ward or you will have an appointment for the Plastic Surgery dressing clinic for the wound to be reviewed.

If required, the graft will then be redressed regularly until it heals. This time varies from patient to patient. It is usually about 2 weeks but it may take longer.

You need to rest and elevate the grafted area until your graft has been reviewed. This is very important for the healing of your skin graft.

Once at home you should continue to rest the grafted area. You may gradually increase your activity but should not stand still – either walk short distances or sit with your leg up on a stool.

## Donor site

The donor site (usually the thigh), has a dressing that is not usually changed for two weeks. It heals itself, as the skin graft is a shaving of skin from the area. Please see separate leaflet about care of donor site.

You may need to take painkillers such as paracetamol at regular intervals, but do not exceed the stated dose of no more than 8 in 24 hours. The donor site often produces more discomfort than the grafted area.

## Long term care

- Once healed use a non perfumed moisturising cream two or three times a day, on both the grafted site and the donor site for three months or longer if the area remains dry.
- Protect the grafted area and the donor site from direct exposure to sunlight. Keep it covered for the first year and then protect it with a sun block there-after.
- Ask your surgeon about camouflage make–up if you are concerned about the appearance of the graft.
- Expect skin discolouration at both the graft and the donor sites. This will gradually improve over the following 9 – 12 months.

**Contact the hospital if there is severe or throbbing pain, bleeding or unpleasant smelling discharge in either the grafted area or the donor site.**

If you have any questions or need any advice please call

## Plastic Surgery Dressing Clinic

Tel: **01865 231173**
between 9am - 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Please leave a message and we will get back to you as soon as possible, the answer phone is checked twice a day.

In an emergency please contact your GP or attend the Emergency Department.

## Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Author: Plastic surgery dressings service team
November 2026
Review: November 2029
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information

*Making a difference across our hospitals*

charity@ouh.nhs.uk | 01865 743 444 | hospitalcharity.co.uk

OXFORD HOSPITALS CHARITY (REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1175809)

Oxford Hospitals Charity

Leaflet reference number: OMI 119562