Having a skin graft around your eyelid

Ophthalmology Department

Information for Patients

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What is a skin graft?

Skin graft is a small piece of skin from another part of your body. We use a graft to replace lost or tight skin.

In your case we apply it to the eyelid to help it heal in the correct position without pulling it too tight. It can be attached using stiches or special glue. We often use skin from the upper eyelid as it is the same colour and thickness as the lower eyelid. If there is not enough skin on the lid, then it can be taken from the front of or behind the ear, or the inner upper arm. This is called the donor site.

Why do I need this?

We use skin grafts to repair a defect in the skin. This is where there is not enough skin on the eyelid to correct the problem.

This is common if:

- A large area has been removed because of skin cancer or other conditions.
- The eyelid has been damaged by injury/burns.
- The skin is very tight or scarred because of past skin conditions or too much exposure to the sun.

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Other treatment: A skin flap can be used sometimes. We can move or rotate some skin from close to the defect to fill the gap. This will not work for large areas.

Preparing for your procedure

Your procedure will take place at the ophthalmic theatre.

The operation takes about 1 to 2 hours for each eye. We usually do this under local anaesthetic, with or without sedation.

You should except to be in all morning or all afternoon. The ophthalmic suite staff will let you know when they are ready for you. This will depend on the theatre operating list order.

Please bring any prescription medicines with you on the day of surgery.

You will not be able to drive home after surgery. You must have a relative or a friend to take you home.

You can wait in the waiting areas if you have booked hospital transport after surgery.

What kind of anaesthetic will I have?

This is usually done under local anaesthetic. This means you will be awake during operation. We will give you an injection into your eyelid to numb the area. We will give you eye drops to make you feel more comfortable. We may offer you sedation if you wish. General anaesthesia is sometimes used for larger grafts.

How will the local anaesthetic and procedure feel like?

- Local anaesthetic works by blocking the way nerves carry pain signals to the brain.
- The area may feel swollen or tight.
- As the local anaesthetic wears off you may find that you have a tingling or burning sensation.
- How long it takes to wear off depends on what type of anaesthetic you have. It often lasts for about 2 to 4 hours. We can give you more if needed during the procedure.

- The local anaesthetic may contain adrenaline. Adrenaline makes the blood vessels around the area smaller. You may look lighter in colour. As the anaesthetic wear off your normal skin colour will come back.
- As the local anaesthetic wears off you may find it helpful to take other pain relief.

After the procedure

- We will put a firm dressing over the graft site to help it stay in place. Do not remove it unless we instruct you to do so. We will take off this dressing on your first clinical appointment.
- You will have some bruising which can last 1 to 2 weeks.
- We close the operation site with delicate stitches which will dissolve or absorb. **Please do not rub over these stiches until the wound has healed.**
- If the donor site is ear or the arm, it will not be covered.
- At your first post-op appointment, we will give you an ointment to apply in the operated eye as instructed.
- Sometimes, some of the stitches used are placed deep against the bone which can cause aching pain for a few weeks. It is important to use pain relief such as paracetamol to make sure you are comfortable.
- You can wash your face with a cloth. Do not let the water get under the dressing. You will be able to wash you hair when the dressing is removed.
- The surgeon will give you a date to check how well you are healing. This is normally 1 week after the operation.

Possible complication after a skin graft on the eyelid

1. Graft failure (poor healing)

- In some cases, the skin graft may not attach properly or may not get enough blood supply. This will lead to a partial or complete graft failure.
- Signs include darkening of the graft, bad pain, or infection. Getting an infection is rare on the eyelids.
- If this happens, your doctor may need to replace the graft.

2. Infection

- Since the eyelid is a sensitive area, bacteria can enter the surgical site and cause infection.
- Symptoms of infection are:
  - increased redness, warmth, or pus around the graft
  - fever or worsening pain after a few days
- We can give antibiotics (oral or ointment) to treat infections if caught early.

3. Mismatched skin colour or texture

- Skin taken from a donor site away from the eyelids (from around the ear or the upper arm) will be thicker or paler than the skin at the face. It will take time to settle in and may always be paler. You can use concealer make up after the site has healed to make the skin colour look even.

4. Uneven healing or thickening of graft

- Grafts thicken a little in the first month after surgery. This should settle within 3 to 6 months.
- If the grafts stays thick, we can do another minor procedure to adjust the graft.

5. Scarring

- Any scarring carries a risk of visible scars. Doctors try to place cuts in natural folds to reduce the look of scars.
- Massaging can help reduce scars forming if needed.

6. Dryness and irritation

- Your eye may feel:
  - dry
  - irritated
  - sensitive to light
- Lubricating eye drops and ointments can help keep the eye comfortable.
- It can take many months for you eye to heal.

Care after a skin graft on the eyelid

1. Keep the area clean and protected

- Try not to touch or rub the graft area. This helps to stop infections and lets the graft heal properly.
- Always make sure to wash your hands before applying any ointment or touching the area.

2. Apply medications as prescribed

- Your doctor may give you antibiotic ointment to apply over the graft to stop any infection.
- We may prescribe you eye drops. Use them as directed. This is to keep your eye lubricated and to stop dryness.
- You can start using eye drops for other conditions (like glaucoma) when we remove the dressing.

3. Reduce swelling and bruising

- You can use a cold compress to reduce swelling. Do not let the cold compress make direct contact with the skin. Make sure it is wrapped in a clean cloth before use.
- Try to keep your head on an extra pillow for the first few nights to help with swelling. Do this even while sleeping.
- Do not sleep facing the side of the graft. This is to stop pressure on the healing area.

4. Avoid straining your eyes

- Limit screen time (phones, computers, TV) to stop eye strain.
- Try not to read for long periods. This can cause tiredness in the eyes.
- Wear sunglasses when going outside. This is to protect your eyes from bright light and dust.

5. Avoid heavy activities

- Do not lift heavy. Do not bend or do strenuous exercise. This is for at least 1 to 2 weeks. This is to avoid pressure on the graft.
- Avoid activities that make you sweat. This is because moisture can affect healing.
- Do not swim for 4 weeks to let the graft heal.

6. Follow dietary advice

- Eat a healthy diet rich in vitamins.
- You should have vitamin C and foods with protein to help with healing.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.

7. Call us if you notice:

- Increased redness, swelling, or pain after a few days.
- Pus or bad smelling drainage.
- Darkening or hardening of the graft.
- Problems closing your eye properly.

Follow-up appointments

- You must attend all scheduled follow-up visits. This is so your doctor can check if the graft is healing well.
- If there are any problems, your doctor can treat them early.

How long does it to heal?

- It can take many months for your eyelid to fully heal.
- Swelling and bruising improve in 1 to 2 weeks.
- The skin graft fully blends into your eyelid in a few months. It will take longer for the colour of the skin graft to match your normal eyelid colour.

Contact details

If you have any concerns before or after your procedure please call:

Oculoplastic Specialist Nurse: **0116 204 7971**, Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm

Eye Emergency Department: **0116 258 6273**

For advice Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

Saturday, Sunday and Bank holidays, 8:30am to 12:30pm

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