

Lower Extremity Free Flap

Patient Care Instructions

General Information

A free flap is comprised of skin, fat and or muscle with blood vessels. It can be taken from the thigh, abdomen, arm or back and used to fill a defect on the lower extremity. The site where the free flap is taken or harvested is called the “donor site”. The tissue is taken along with two blood vessels. One of the blood vessels supplies blood to the flap (the artery) and the other drains blood from it (the vein). Once the flap is raised, it is transferred and sewn into the defect. The blood vessels supplying and draining the flap are then joined to blood vessels in your leg, under a microscope. These blood vessels then keep the flap alive while it heals into place. The donor site is then closed with sutures or skin graft. You maybe admitted to the ICU for close monitoring of the circulation to the flap.

Pre-Operative Guidelines

Smoking should be stopped a minimum of 6 weeks prior to surgery. Smoking should be avoided for at least 6 weeks after surgery as well. Smoking can greatly interfere with healing and lead to postoperative complications.

Do not eat or drink anything after midnight the night before surgery. This includes no water, gum or hard candy. Blood pressure and/or heart medications can be taken with a sip of water as directed by your prescribing physician.

If you take medication for diabetes, then confirm with your prescribing physician how to manage these medications prior to surgery.

If you are prone to nausea or motion sickness let your anesthesiologist know on the day of surgery. Medications can be started prior to surgery or during surgery to help improve your postoperative experience.

Post-Operative Instructions

Take pain medications and muscle relaxants as directed. Do not drink alcohol with these medications. Do not take pain medicines on an empty stomach. You need to take a daily aspirin which will be prescribed for you. You may resume all your home medicines as you normally take them.

Take a stool softener/laxative, such as Colace, or Biscodyl, until bowels begin to function normally after surgery.

Do not smoke or be around smoking as even secondhand smoke delays healing and increases the risk of complications.

You may resume a normal diet after surgery. Do follow a well-balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.

Activity Restrictions

Keep your operated extremity elevated at or above heart level.

After your surgery, you may need to avoid certain exercises and movements. This is to make sure you don't create any tension on the newly reattached blood vessels. Your surgical team will give you specific instructions.

Please refrain from any strenuous activity. Absolutely no jogging, swimming, or lifting. Your surgical team will advise you when and what types of physical activities you can resume.

Sleeping in a recliner or a wedge pillow or pillows behind the knees may help make sleeping more tolerable during the healing phase.

Incision Care

The care of your donor site will depend on how the wound was closed. It may have been closed by bringing the edges of the skin together with sutures and staples. If this method was used, you will have an Aquacel dressing in place.

If a skin graft was used, it may have a wound vac dressing. A wound vac is a negative pressure dressing attached to a machine. The dressing is usually removed 5 to 7 days after surgery. The site where the skin graft was taken will have a clear plastic dressing. Please leave it in place until seen in clinic.

No matter how the donor site is closed, avoid tension or pulling on the site.

Drains will remain in place until total for each drain is 30 ml or less for 24 hours. You will be given a drain output log to record the output. Please bring this log to your post-operative appointments.

Don't apply direct pressure to your free flap.

Don't place direct heat or cold on the surgical sites. Your surgical sites may be numb, and this could cause injury. This includes hot water bottles, heating pads, electric blankets, and ice packs.

Don't put anything on your incisions until they are completely healed.

Don't shave over your incisions while your sutures are still in place. When your sutures are removed, use an electric razor on and around the free flap or reconstructed area.

Avoid taking baths or using hot tubs and swimming pools until your incisions are completely healed. This is usually 4 to 6 weeks after your surgery.

Avoid sun exposure to your surgical sites. After your incisions have completely healed, use a PABA-free sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.

Post-Operative Expectations

You must keep your leg elevated at all times. Your surgical team will tell you when you can stop.

You may have some limitations on your physical activities. Your surgical team will discuss this with you.

A physical therapist (PT) will work with you while you're in the hospital to make sure you're safe and strong enough to go home.

Your surgical team will tell you when you can dangle your legs or walk. This may not be for 1 to 3 weeks or more after your surgery.

When to call the office

If you have swelling or redness around the incision.

If you have severe pain not relieved by pain medication.

If you have any side effects from medication: rash, nausea, headache, vomiting.

If you have temperature over 101 F.

If you have yellow or green drainage from an incision or notice foul odor.

For medical questions please call 817-702-9100 or JPS patients call 817-702-4268 or send a message via myChart.

Follow-up Care and Appointments

You will be seen approximately 5-7 days after your surgery. If for some reason you do not have an appointment scheduled, please call 817-702-9100 or JPS 817-702-4268.