

Bolster Dressing Care / Full Thickness Skin Graft After Care

What is a bolster dressing?

A bolster dressing is a pressure dressing that is sutured in place over the wound. It consists of a ball of vaseline gauze (often yellow in color) that is tied down with sutures. A bolster dressing keeps pressure on a wound allowing it to heal while protecting the wound. Common uses for bolster dressings are a skin graft or a wound that needs to heal undisturbed.

A skin graft involves taking a piece of skin from one site and placing it onto another to cover a defect in the skin. Since the skin graft has been completely separated from its original blood supply, in order to survive, it needs to establish a new blood supply. This will occur over the next 1-3 weeks. For the graft to "take", it is extremely important that it not be bumped, jarred or disturbed in any way for the next week.

Should I decrease my activity level?

Activity increases your risk of bleeding, bruising and pain by increasing blood flow to the area.

- 1) Avoid strenuous exercise, bending, lifting, aerobic walking, sports, etc. any activity that increases your heart rate and therefore increases your risk of problems.
- 2) No swimming in pool water or ocean water for 4 weeks after your surgery to help minimize the risk of infection.

How do I take care of the bolster dressing on the skin graft site (the site of the defect)?

- 1) A bolster dressing (often yellow) is sutured in place on top of the graft. Do not get this dressing wet in the shower. You may gently clean the perimeter of the dressing with a Qtip dipped in hydrogen peroxide if there is crusting accumulating around the edges. Apply antibiotic ointment around the perimeter of the dressing twice a day. We recommend Bacitracin or Polysporin ointment, available over the counter at pharmacies.
- 2) Avoid disturbing the area as much as possible and keep it as dry as you can. Do not get it wet in the shower. Do not place an ice pack on this site.
- 3) If you would like, you may loosely cover the entire bolster dressing with gauze, but avoid disturbing the graft site itself. Let the area "breathe" as much as possible and avoid having the area sit underneath a soggy dressing.

How do I take care of the wound at the donor site/where the skin graft was taken from?

- 1) After 24 hours, remove the original dressing. After the bandage is taken off, the sutures or wound can get wet in the shower, and soap/shampoo can run over it. Clean the wound gently with a Qtip dipped in hydrogen peroxide to loosen any crusting over any sutures. If the area was left open to heal on its own without sutures, use diluted hydrogen peroxide 50-50 in water. Apply a thin layer of antibiotic ointment (bacitracin ointment or polysporin ointment).

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- 2) If you wish to cover the area when outside, you may cover it with a loose dressing or a Bandaid, but unless it is actively bleeding, it is best to keep the area uncovered as much as possible.

How can I manage my pain after surgery?

Any pain is related to swelling and should be minimal. For the first 1-2 days:

- 1) If you had a skin defect repair such as a Mohs defect closure, it is best to NOT ice the flap or graft, ie the areas from which skin was moved to cover the defect. This is because icing constricts the blood supply, which is vital to the graft or flap healing successfully. However, you may ice areas of your face not directly involved in the repair, but which are starting to swell and bruise. For example, the eyelids frequently swell for which icing can help provide comfort. Similarly, a headache can often be soothed by icing the forehead or the bridge of your nose, provided that area was not part of your reconstruction.
- 2) To ice, apply an ice pack over the dressing for 15-20 minutes every 1-2 hours until bedtime on the day of surgery and 1-2 days thereafter. A ziplock bag with frozen peas or corn works well and does not place undue pressure on the face.
- 3) Take Tylenol extra strength (acetaminophen 500 mg), 1 -2 tablets every 6-8 hours as needed, not to exceed 4-6 pills in a 24-hour period, (unless allergic) or unable to take due to medical comorbidities.
- 4) If Tylenol alone is insufficient, you may also take ibuprofen/motrin/naproxen in addition to Tylenol. This type of pain reliever thins your blood and may exacerbate any bleeding and bruising,, so try to avoid taking these if you are still bleeding.
- 5) Sleep with your head elevated on pillows.

Can I take Arnica to help with any bruising?

Arnica is a homeopathic supplement that helps minimize bruising and swelling. It is available in both pill and cream version over the counter at pharmacies and health food stores. You may apply the cream on any bruised skin to help the bruises fade faster, but do not apply the cream directly over any incision or sutures. If you choose to take the arnica tablets as well, it is best to start taking these as soon as possible after your surgery, as directed on the bottle.