

Postoperative Recovery Timelines Part 2: A Guide for Patients and Caregivers

Authored by Megan Hoang

Introduction

The length of time to recover after a surgery can depend on many things, such as the type and complexity of the surgery and the closure style. As we went through the stages of wound healing and the recovery timelines for simpler procedures in dermatology in part 1 of this topic, we will go over more complicated methods of healing in this piece.

Open Wounds

Primary intention wound healing happens when doctors use stitches, staples, glue, or other methods to close a wound. On the other hand, secondary intention healing is when open wounds are left to heal from the base up. This usually happens when a wound can't be closed with stitches and has lost a lot of tissue. Secondary intention healing is more common for wounds with a round shape, that cover uneven surfaces, that are infected, or are on areas of the body where it is hard to use stitches or other methods.¹ Healing by secondary intention may also be unplanned when wounds that were closed can accidentally open up again. Open wound healing takes longer than primary intention with closed wounds, which may be due to a bigger wound size, higher risk of infection and contamination, as well as other factors like medications. Wound healing this way might stay open for many months and could lead extra time in the hospital.²

Flap or Graft

Skin flaps and skin grafts are when skin from one area is moved to another part of the body to cover or replace damaged or missing skin on another area of the body. Doctors use them when they can't close a wound with stitches or other simpler methods, or when it is not

appropriate to let open wounds heal. Skin grafts consist of part of the top layers of skin (partial-thickness) or the full top layers of skin (full-thickness).⁴ They don't have their own blood supply. Skin flaps include more tissue and come with their own blood supply.⁵ Skin flaps and grafts are commonly used in dermatology to close wounds from skin cancer removal or for skin damaged by wounds, diseases, burns, injuries, or infections.^{4,6} How long it takes to heal after skin flap or graft surgery depends on how big and what type of graft or flap it is, as well as the location of the flap/graft site. Skin flaps can require 2 to 3 weeks for initial healing, and up to 2 to 3 months for full healing. Full-thickness skin grafts typically take 2 to 3 weeks for initial healing, and months for complete take. Partial-thickness grafts take 1 to 2 weeks for initial healing, and weeks for complete recovery.⁷

Conclusion

It is important to follow your doctor's care instructions and watch for any signs of infection or complications. If you have any worries along the way, don't hesitate to contact your doctor for advice.

References

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