

Radial Forearm Free Flap

What is a radial forearm free flap?

This is surgery that removes a piece of skin from your inner forearm and uses it to replace tissue that was removed due to cancer. Doctors often use this surgery to reconstruct an area in the head and neck.

What happens during the surgery?

Your surgeon removes a segment of skin, fat, and blood vessels (called the flap) from the inside of your forearm near the wrist. The surgeon then sews the flap into place where the tumor tissue was removed in the head or neck area.

The area in your arm from which the surgeon took the flap may get a graft of skin from another area of your body, such as the thigh.

How will the surgery affect my arm?

You will need to wear a bandage on your arm for at least 10 days after the surgery. Some nerve damage can happen during the flap removal. This can cause a tingling or numbing sensation around the base of the thumb for several weeks after the surgery. Permanent nerve damage is rare.

You may also notice decreased hand strength or that your hand feels more sensitive to temperature changes. These conditions usually go away soon. It is rare to have less hand strength for the long term.

What are the possible complications?

Pain. After any surgery, some pain is normal. While you are in the hospital, your cancer care team will do their best to control your pain. They will ask you often about how much pain you feel on a scale of 0-10, with 10 being the worst pain you can imagine. This helps them decide what medicines will help most. They may put pain medicine directly into your veins or give you pills, depending on what works best.

When you go home, you will get a prescription for the same pain medicine you took in the hospital. Tell your health care team if the medicines do not relieve your pain.

Infection. Whenever there is a break in your skin, there is also a risk of infection. Good hand washing is the best and easiest way to prevent infection from spreading. Wash or disinfect your hands often, and make sure your caregivers and visitors do, too.

Watch for these signs that an infection may be starting:

- More pain, redness, or warmth in the area of your surgery
- More drainage from your surgery wound
- Fever higher than 100.3°F

If you notice any of these signs, tell your cancer care team right away.

Blood clots. Inactivity raises the risk that a blood clot will form in your legs. If a clot happens, it can move through the veins to your lungs. This can be deadly. To help prevent blood clots, your nurses will ask you to get up and move around as much as you can. While you are in the hospital, your cancer care team may put special foam boots on your legs. They inflate and deflate to keep the blood in your leg veins moving so it cannot clot. Your doctor may also prescribe a medicine to prevent blood clots from forming.