

This leaflet has been written to provide you with information about care you may receive. Your treatment is very individual and your surgical team will ensure they explain everything in detail.

The length of your stay in hospital will be between 7 and 14 days approximately, depending on the extent of the surgery performed and your general health.

Please remember that this is just a guide and that the care for each person will differ according to their needs.

What is an Anterolateral Thigh (ALT) Free Flap?

When a cancer is surgically removed, it leaves a hole. An ALT free flap is a way of transferring tissue from your thigh to fill this hole.

What does the surgery involve?

Thigh tissue (skin, connective tissue, fat and muscle) is removed from your thigh along with two blood vessels, one which supplies blood to the flap (the artery) and one which drains blood from it (the vein).

Using a microscope, the blood vessels supplying and draining the ALT free flap are then joined to the blood vessels in your neck. These blood vessels keep the flap alive while it heals into its new place.

What happens to the hole in my leg?

Your surgeon will close the edges of the thigh wound together with stitches or clips. These will be removed 10 - 14 days after your operation. Very occasionally, a skin graft may be required to close the wound and this is usually taken from another part of your thigh.

What can I expect after the operation?

Your thigh will be dressed with a bandage. A small tube is placed through the skin into the underlying wound to drain any blood that may collect. This drain will be removed after a few days.

Will I have a scar?

All cuts made through the skin leave a scar but the majority will fade in time. Scars can take up to two years to mature. The scar on your thigh is approximately 9 to 10 inches long (23 – 26 centimetres).

What are the possible complications?

There are potential risks and complications associated with any operation. Fortunately with this type of surgery complications are rare and may not happen to you. However, it is important that you are aware of them and have the opportunity to discuss them with your surgeon.

- **Bleeding** – bleeding should be minimal and the wound drain should help stop any accumulation of blood (haematoma) from causing problems.

- **Infection** – there is always a very small risk of infection with any surgical procedure but you will be given antibiotics through a vein whilst you are under the anaesthetic and for the first few days after surgery.
- **Numbness** – occasionally a patch of skin over your thigh will feel numb and tingly after the operation. This numbness may take several months to disappear and, in a small number of patients, may last forever.
- **Muscle weakness** – you may find that your thigh muscle is weaker than usual to begin with but the physiotherapists will give you exercises to help it return to its normal strength.
- **Flap failure** – in two to five percent of cases one of the blood vessels supplying or draining the flap will develop a blood clot within it. This means that the flap doesn't get any fresh blood or, if the drainage vein clots, then the flap becomes very congested with old blood. It is an occurrence that usually happens within the first three days and means that you will have to return to the operating theatre to have the clot removed. Removing the clot is not always successful and on these occasions the flap fails and an alternative method of reconstruction will be sought.
- **Seroma** – this is a collection of fluid under the scar. It usually resolves by itself but may occasionally require drainage by your surgical team.

- **Wound breakdown** – this can occur if the wound becomes infected but again this is unusual and you will be given antibiotics routinely to prevent infection.

Questions or concerns

Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to talk to your doctor or clinical nurse specialist.

Macmillan Head and Neck Clinical Nurse Specialist
Tel: 01342 414493

Macmillan Information and Support Centre - Queen Victoria Hospital
Tel: 01342 414369

Email: cancer.information@qvh.nhs.uk

For out of hours emergencies, please contact our switchboard on 01342 414000 and ask for the maxillofacial doctor on duty.

Links to further information and support

Macmillan Cancer Support

Provides practical, medical and financial support and push for better cancer care (offers an interpreting service).

Tel: 0808 808 000

www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS Choices for Cancer Information Prescriptions

www.nhs.uk/ipg

NHS urgent help and advice line

Tel: 111

Cancer Research UK

This charity provides information about cancer, treatment and clinical trials.

Tel: 0808 800 4040

www.cancerresearchuk.org

Headstart

Head and neck cancer support group which meets six times per year, offering an opportunity for people to meet other head and neck cancer patients.

Tel: 01342 414493 or 01634 825389

NHS stop smoking service

Tel: 0800 022 4332

www.nhs.uk/smokefree

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Patient Information

Maxillofacial Unit

Please ask if you
would like this leaflet
in larger print or a
different format.

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