

Informed Consent in Skin Surgery

It is important to be well informed regarding any invasive procedure which could have complications. This principle applies to skin surgery. The reasons for performing the procedure should have been clearly explained and any other options.

I hope I have discussed in detail the proposed procedure and the fact that potential alternatives are likely to be inferior in outcome. The vast majority of skin surgery procedures are performed uneventfully with no complications or side-effects and aesthetic and functional outcomes are satisfactory. Some procedures have more risk of complications than others eg. larger excisions, site-specific eg. lower leg, and use of a local skin flap or skin graft in the reconstruction. Minor self-limiting complications affecting approximately 5% include temporary pain, tenderness and slight initial bleeding. Surgical site infection occurs in approximately 3% of procedures. This tends to arise in the first week and shows itself as increasing redness, tenderness, swelling and discharge. In some cases, use of an oral antibiotic to prevent infection may be recommended. More significant complications with skin surgery include persistent bleeding and haematoma formation, and nerve damage (which can potentially cause numbness or muscle weakness). Delayed complications including wound breakdown/dehiscence, incompletely excised tumour, delayed healing, swelling around the site and bruising. Worse case scenarios include having to be admitted post operatively for significant excess bleeding or a significant surgical site infection requiring intravenous antibiotics – both these scenarios occur in less than 1% of procedures.

Late complications include poor cosmesis, wound contracture with potential tension on free margins, unpredictable scarring, including stitch marks, thickened or stretched scars and potential future recurrence of the lesion that has been attempted to be removed.

Individual patient factors will be discussed eg. blood thinning medications – usually not stopped, significant allergy to any substance which you could be exposed to during skin surgery eg. elastoplast, iodine, chlorhexidine, local anaesthetic, latex rubber.

Smoking has been shown to slow down wound healing and can cause wounds to break down. Please try to stop smoking or at least cut right down 3 weeks before and for 3 weeks after your skin surgery. Please stop all herbal remedies and over the counter supplements 2 weeks prior to your skin surgery.

To minimise complications, sterile technique is used. Skilled tissue handling and suturing and appropriate choice of repair are important. Careful haemostasis and use of a pressure dressing reduces bleeding. Resting for several days helps to facilitate healing and reduce the chance of complications. Avoid strenuous exercise, heavy lifting or stretching, depending on the site of your wound to avoid tension at the wound site. Stay warm, avoid alcohol, get adequate sleep and eat well. Take paracetamol initially for pain relief if needed. If necessary, ibuprofen or codeine can be added.

I invite any questions to be asked or points to be clarified and I hope that overall you understand the details and that the risk/benefit ratio is favourable and that you are happy to proceed.

If you have any further questions or queries, please e-mail me in advance or bring this up on the day of the procedure when the consent process will be completed.